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**ALL-AMERICAN VACATIONLAND: AFRICAN AMERICAN, PUERTO RICAN, AND
ITALIAN RESORTS IN THE CATSKILL MOUNTAINS, 1920-1980**

A Dissertation Presented

by

LAURA A. MILLER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

September 2014

Department of History

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LAURA A. MILLER

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DEDICATION

To Loretta Miller and Anna Napolitano,
two fearless and inspirational women.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much of the source material related to the history of African American, Puerto Rican, and Italian resorts in the Catskill Mountains is tucked away in people's memories, or stashed in boxes in their basements. A number of people graciously agreed to be interviewed and share their photographs, postcards, and other mementos for this dissertation. I am sincerely grateful for their assistance. Their memories helped me bring to light these important, and largely forgotten, histories.

I greatly appreciate the generosity extended to me by many different institutions and archives. A Bauer-Gordon Travel Award from the University of Massachusetts Amherst Department of History, and a Graduate School Dissertation Research Grant supported multiple research trips to New York State. The New York State Archives Larry J. Hackman Research Residency Program allowed me to examine the records of the New York State Commission Against Discrimination and the New York State Police Non-Criminal Investigation Program. A Burney Parker Research Fellowship from The Texas Collection at Baylor University allowed me to access the papers of African American resort owner Jules Bledsoe. (Who would have thought that this research would take me all the way to Waco, Texas?)

I am also grateful to the archivists and the staff at the New York State Archives, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Texas Collection at Baylor University, the Delaware County Historical Association, the Durham Center Museum Research Library, the Office of the Plattekill Historian, and the Vedder Research Library for all their gracious assistance and generosity.

I could not have asked for a better dissertation committee. Chris Appy has been a wonderful teacher, mentor, and advisor. He read countless drafts, fielded frantic emails, wrote letters on my behalf, and taught me to trust my instincts. His constant encouragement has helped see me through the Ph.D. program. David Glassberg championed this project from the first day that I showed up in his office with an African American “Travelguide” and a Smith Haven postcard; his scholarship, public history work, and optimism is a consistent source of inspiration. Jennifer Fronc has had an indelible imprint on my work as a scholar and writer. Her mentorship and careful editing pushed me to clarify my arguments and write with authority. Jennifer Guglielmo’s scholarship helped give form to my arguments about the history of Italian resorts, and her thoughtful feedback was essential to pulling these three histories together. There are many other people in the UMass History Department that have shaped my development as a scholar and professional. Marla Miller has been a role model, an inspiration, and a dear friend. She helped me keep my head in the public history game long after I had completed my Master’s Degree. Special thanks also go to Jennifer Heuer and Jon Olsen, who I have truly enjoyed working and chatting with over the past seven years.

I am lucky to have found a brilliant, funny, and all-around amazing group of friends in the Pioneer Valley. Collectively, they formed an unparalleled support system. Michella Marino, my “academic lifemate,” gets special acknowledgment for coining the best term for our friendship and getting it in print before I could come up with something better. Her intellectual and emotional support, and her amazing sense of humor, kept me sane. Chris Parcels, Dan Chard, and Kate Freedman have

provided unwavering friendship and guidance that helped me navigate the ups and downs of graduate school and life. The same goes for Jessica Frankenfield, Kate Preissler, Emily Oswald, Jessie McLeod, and Lori Satter.

My family is everything to me. My mother, Loretta Miller, and my grandmother, Anna Napolitano, are two amazing role models. I am grateful to my mom for her willingness to be interviewed, her eagerness to hop in the car and explore the Catskills, her enthusiastic postcard hunting, and her enduring confidence in me. My older brothers, Richard and Jason Miller, have an almost encyclopedic knowledge of the Shawangunk Mountains and the Hudson Valley, honed by years of exploring and observing their native corner of New York. They have always given me advice, guidance, and unconditional support, and I am lucky to have them. Jason also provided much needed last-minute editing, without which many of my sentences would start with “And.” And many still do, I’m sure.

Last but certainly not least, I am forever grateful to my husband, Christopher Condon. He has been a calm, comforting presence amidst the hectic pace of our lives. His unwavering love, unconditional support, and corny sense of humor keep me grounded, and always laughing. I couldn’t have done this without him.

ABSTRACT

ALL-AMERICAN VACATIONLAND: AFRICAN AMERICAN, PUERTO RICAN, AND ITALIAN RESORTS IN THE CATSKILL MOUNTAINS, 1920-1980

SEPTEMBER 2014

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In the twentieth century, New York State's Catskill Mountain resort area was an "All-American" vacationland. Each summer, many different racial and ethnic minorities sought a brief respite from their lives and labor in New York City at boarding houses, resorts, and bungalows scattered throughout the mountains. Collectively, these groups contributed to the development of a highly segregated resort area that reflected, on an exaggerated scale, the racial, ethnic, and class divisions within New York City and the nation as a whole in the twentieth century.

This dissertation examines the Catskills resort landscape through a comparative analysis of African American, Puerto Rican, and Italian summer resorts from 1920 to 1980. It draws on oral history interviews, newspaper accounts, and archival sources to trace the history of these resorts from their origins as modest boarding houses in the 1920s and 1930s, to their immense growth in popularity after World War II, and their decline in the final decades of the twentieth century. All three groups created resorts where they sought to foster and sustain a sense of collective pride and identity in insulated recreational environments, free from the

racism and nativism of dominant white society. Summer resorts catered to and were shaped by each group's distinct social, cultural, and political needs; these needs evolved according to changes in vacationers' lives in urban and suburban areas around New York City.

Considered alongside one another, these histories demonstrate that summer resorts were not solely a stepping-stone for ethnic minorities on their way to assimilation and acceptance in American society. In the decades following World War II, Italians successfully reconfigured the meanings of their ethnic identity to gain acceptance as white Americans. By contrast, racial minorities found that racism continued to hamper their efforts at upward mobility, well after legal barriers to their success were dismantled. Summer resorts built upon and helped naturalize patterns of segregation and inequality that structured vacationers' everyday lives in the New York metropolitan area. In this sense, too, the resort landscape was "All-American"—a striking reflection of the country's deeply entrenched racial hierarchy.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation was born of my serendipitous connection to the subject matter. In 1979, my parents purchased the property of Smith Haven, a former African American resort owned by Judge A. Smith and Minnie E. Mobley Smith in Pine Bush, New York. In the 1950s and 1960s, the small resort was a popular summer destination for African American vacationers from New York City [Figure 1]. Eighty miles from Manhattan at the base of the Shawangunk Mountains, the resort was close enough to the city for an accessible and affordable vacation, but rural enough to feel like a true getaway from urban life. An early advertisement for the resort enticed visitors:

Spend your weekends and vacation at Smith Haven. 'A scenic vacation spot in the Catskills.' The best in home cooked foods, 3 meals daily, Sundays and holidays 2 meals. Variety of sports and recreation: Tennis, handball, shuffleboard, ping-pong, etc. Horseback riding at ranch, swimming at park. Golfing nearby.¹

By the time my parents purchased the Smith Haven property, the resort had been shuttered for almost a decade. It was, by all accounts, a fixer-upper.² But it had a spacious farmhouse for their growing family, and ample storage space in the resort outbuildings to accommodate my father's growing antiques business. Evidence of the property's past was everywhere: an in-ground swimming pool, a guest room building, a bungalow, a tennis court, a basketball court, a shuffleboard court, and a covered barbeque pit. All were in disrepair. My parents set about fixing

¹ Smith Haven advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, July 3, 1954.

² My mother, Loretta Miller, frequently speaks of "camping" in the house in those first few stressful years.

up the property to accommodate our family and make it habitable once again. As they slowly transformed it for residential use, visible reminders of the resort were obscured. The dense forest behind the house, left to its own devices, enveloped the crumbling shuffleboard court and barbeque pit. The farmhouse's large kitchen, a behind-the-scenes space once used to prepare meals for some thirty to forty guests, was torn down and replaced with an outdoor patio. The honeymoon suite was remodeled into a small apartment that my parents rented out to family members and friends. The badly deteriorating bungalow was donated to the Pine Bush Fire Department for a controlled burning exercise. The swimming pool became too much of a burden to maintain, so my mother had it bulldozed and filled in.



Figure 1. Postcard from Smith Haven resort in Pine Bush, New York. Source: Ad-View Post Cards, Newark, New Jersey.

Yet hints of the property's history remain. A metal room number is still affixed to my childhood bedroom door. The two-story rooming house still stands

behind the renovated farmhouse. Trash pits filled with old bottles and broken china are scattered throughout the woods behind the house. A large box of Smith Haven postcards still exists, despite some having been sent out as invitations to summer barbeques. As I grew up in the 1980s and early 1990s, African American families would sometimes stop by the house to see if Smith Haven was still in operation. I remember their questions: When did it close? What happened? My mother, who grew up on a dairy farm a half-mile down the road, knew enough about the property's history to provide a basic outline of the resort's demise and transformation.

I witnessed these changes and encounters over the course of my childhood and teenage years, but thought about them very little. As a young white woman living in a town with a predominantly white population, I did not understand the complex meanings and memories embedded in the landscape around me. My mother, Loretta Marie Miller (née Napolitano), is the granddaughter of Italian immigrants; my father, Richard Miller, was a mixture of German, Irish, and Dutch, with ancestors in the Hudson Valley going back to the 17th century. Despite this mixed ancestry, I grew up *feeling* Italian American. My ethnic identity was due in large part to the presence of my mother's tightly knit, Italian American extended family, most of whom lived in Pine Bush or the surrounding area. The Millers were decidedly un-ethnic in comparison. I grew up aware there were many other white ethnic populations in the Hudson Valley—Irish, German, Greek, and Eastern European Jewish immigrants, among others—but I knew little of the presence and history of African Americans. Their stories were almost completely missing from

the history recorded in town libraries, museums, and historical societies. It was also missing to me, someone who grew up in a home that was a crucial part of that history.

I started to reexamine the former Smith Haven property as a graduate student studying American social, cultural, and environmental history. I took stock of the things that remained – the buildings, the property's layout, surviving postcards (of which there were, thankfully, dozens remaining), an African American "Travelguide" from 1955 featuring a Smith Haven advertisement, and an old Smith Haven room key. These objects prompted questions. Was Smith Haven the only African American resort in the Catskills? The history of Jewish resorts has been well documented, but did other racial and ethnic groups vacation in the area, too? If so, what drew all of these people to the mountains in the twentieth century? Were most resorts segregated by race and/or ethnicity? Why did local historical societies do so little to recognize the history of these resorts? I began to realize that this was an important, if largely unrecognized, history, and that I had been living amidst it for many years.

With my eyes newly opened to the layers of resort history in the rural landscape, I began looking beyond the boundaries of the Smith Haven property to the greater landscape of the Shawangunk and Catskill Mountains. Suddenly, evidence of former resorts and the once-thriving resort industry stood out. There were large abandoned houses with multiple outbuildings, decrepit signs announcing resorts that no longer existed, empty and crumbling swimming pools and handball courts, and once-elegant theaters that today sit uneasily in small, economically-

depressed towns. It seemed like there were relics and ruins of the region's resort-filled past at every bend in the country roads winding through Orange, Ulster, Sullivan, Greene, and Delaware counties.

My eyes did not deceive me. Resorts *were* everywhere in the Catskills in the twentieth century, and they were owned and patronized by a remarkably diverse group of ethnic and racial minorities. I realized that it was impossible for these hordes of vacationers to go unnoticed by local residents, many who benefitted from their presence through direct employment or increased business each summer.

I questioned family and friends who lived through the heyday of the area's resorts in the 1950s and 1960s. My mother, Loretta Miller, offered vivid memories of Smith Haven and its guests. Born in 1948, she grew up on a dairy farm down the road from the resort: "I remember busloads . . . going up the hill. I also remember big Cadillacs and big cars that would bring vacationers up the road to Smith Haven." Her parents had a friendly business relationship with the Smiths, supplying the resort with milk and eggs. Her father, my grandfather, cut and baled the hay in the fields behind Smith Haven, access to which required driving straight through the Smiths' property: "I remember sitting on top of the hay wagon, which was loaded with hay bales, and we went right through their driveway . . . and I remember all the people came out to see the farmer and the hay."³ The African American vacationers came primarily from New York City and other nearby urban areas, and her parents'

³ Loretta Miller, interview by author, Northampton, MA, August 2, 2012.

farm was a source of interest. Smith Haven guests would sometimes walk down the road to see the dairy farm, check out the cows, and buy eggs to bring back to the city.

Beyond Smith Haven, did my mother remember Pine Bush being a vacation destination for urban New Yorkers when she was growing up in the 1950s and 1960s? “Yes, because our church [Church of the Infant Savior, Pine Bush’s Roman Catholic Church] used to *burst* in the summer, and we always used to refer to them as ‘the city people.’ And there were a lot of Italians. *A lot* of Italians.”⁴ The church population swelled so much in the summertime that they built a small satellite church, Our Lady of the Valley, in nearby Walker Valley to accommodate the many Catholic visitors who occupied summer homes, bungalow colonies, and boarding houses in the area.⁵ As a teenager in the mid-1960s, my mother grew more familiar with the tourist trade when she found employment as a housekeeper and waitress at Grau’s, a resort owned by German-Americans in Walker Valley, and as a babysitter at a Jewish bungalow colony in Pine Bush.

When I first told my grandfather, Norman Miller, that I was researching the history of African American resorts in the Catskills, he related one of his own memories. He recalled that in the 1960s, as a highway construction worker, he worked on a section of U.S. Route 209 that passed in front of Paradise Farm, an African American resort in Cuddebackville, New York. Someone at the resort invited the predominantly white construction crew in to the bar for a drink, and they

⁴ Miller, interview.

⁵ Walker Valley and Pine Bush are neighboring hamlets in the Town of Shawangunk, New York. (Pine Bush is split between the Town of Shawangunk and the Town of Crawford.)

accepted the invitation. When they walked in, they were startled and unnerved to find themselves outnumbered—the resort’s patrons were all African Americans.⁶ In my grandfather’s telling, the men quickly downed their drinks, paid for them, and left. It was a brief story bursting with racial subtext that he did not—or could not—explain. Before I worked up the nerve to ask more questions, he passed away. This enigmatic story raised many questions: What, specifically, made my grandfather and his coworkers so uncomfortable about the situation? Did their unease reflect a broader unease among local white residents about the presence of affluent African American vacationers in their towns? Did these kinds of interactions ever push rural white residents like my grandfather to reassess their prejudices? What motivated someone at the African American resort to invite the mostly-white construction crew into the bar for a drink? My grandfather’s story pushed me to dig deeper into the intertwined experiences of vacationers and locals, even when the subject hit uncomfortably close to home.

It seemed like everyone I spoke with in Pine Bush who was alive in the 1950s and 1960s had memories of the many boarding houses, resorts, and bungalow colonies in the area. Two separate childhood friends had grandparents who owned Italian boarding houses in Walker Valley. Members of my extended family worked odd jobs at local resorts; in the 1960s, my uncle worked as kitchen staff at Fiscarelli Farms, an Italian boarding house. Many of my childhood classmates lived in a residential area in Walker Valley known as the “Lake Estates”; in the postwar

⁶ The anecdote from my grandfather, Norman Miller, is my own recollection of a conversation we had when I first told him about my dissertation topic. The conversation was not recorded, unfortunately, and he has since passed away.

decades, this community was a summer bungalow colony of mostly-Italian families from New York City. Many of these families decided to settle permanently in the area, and remodeled and winterized the small, one-story houses to make them suitable for year-round habitation. Some interviewees had more recent memories: in the early 1990s my brother Jason Miller, who is eight years older than me, worked as a waiter at the Jeronimo Hotel in Walker Valley, a resort owned by his best friend's parents.

These connections all came as a bit of a surprise, despite growing up on the former Smith Haven resort property. Like many others who grew up in the 1980s and 1990s, I learned about the significance of the Catskill Mountains resort area through popular culture—in particular, the 1987 film *Dirty Dancing* with Patrick Swayze and Jennifer Grey. This movie became *the* reference point that many people have about Catskills resorts; it solidified the image of the mountains as a predominantly Jewish resort area. Despite all of the different ethnic groups that vacationed just in my small hometown (let alone in the broader Catskills resort area) and the memories that older Pine Bush residents have of these vacationers, many still emphasized the history of Jewish resorts. I realized that if locals still thought of the Catskills as a Jewish resort area, despite all evidence to the contrary, the public perception must be even more skewed.

The Jewish resorts rightly loom large in the American popular imagination.⁷ They left a rich entertainment legacy, star-studded with comedians including Milton

⁷ Popular and academic writing about tourism in the Catskill Mountains is in no short supply; most of this writing, however, has focused on the immensely

Berle, Rodney Dangerfield, Mel Brooks, and Henny Youngman. The resorts rightly stand out in number, size, popularity, and influence on popular culture. But scholars and the public alike have overlooked the extent to which the Catskills resort landscape was (and still is) remarkably multi-ethnic and multi-racial.⁸ Enterprising immigrants of many different nationalities began establishing boarding houses and resorts in the Catskills in the early decades of the twentieth century, catering to working- and middle-class families from the New York metropolitan area. After World War II, these resorts expanded dramatically in number and size to accommodate the increasing number of families that could afford to vacation in the mountains. The multiethnic flavor of the resort landscape was reflected in the variety of nicknames the mountains acquired: in addition to the well-known “Borscht Belt,” Italians vacationed in the “Bocce Belt” and “Italian Alps,” Syrians and

popular Jewish resorts in the Catskills. See for example, Phil Brown, *In the Catskills: A Century of the Jewish Experience in “The Mountains”* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), Alf Evers, Elizabeth Cromley, Betsy Blackmar, and Neil Harris, *Resorts of the Catskills* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979); Susan Sessions Rugh, *Are We There Yet? The Golden Age of American Family Vacations* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 169-179; and David Stradling, *Making Mountains: New York City and the Catskills* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), 177-208.

⁸ There are two notable exceptions: one is a 1994 museum exhibit by the Delaware County Historical Association (hereafter DCHA), “The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills.” The exhibit provided thorough examination and documentation of the many different racial and ethnic groups that established resorts in the Catskill Mountains. Thankfully, the DCHA has preserved a substantial archive of oral histories, photos, researcher’s field notes and other documents from the exhibit, which can be accessed at the DCHA’s Library and Archives in Delhi, New York. This archive and the tremendous legwork done by the researchers working for the DCHA, have proved invaluable to my research. Another exception is Rebecca S. Miller’s master’s thesis, “Swinging Clockwise: Music, Dance, and Identity in the Ethnic Resorts of the Catskill Mountains” (Wesleyan University, 1994). Miller was one of the scholars who helped create the DCHA exhibit.

Lebanese in the “Yogurt Belt,” Spaniards and Puerto Ricans in the “Spanish Alps,” Germans in the “German Alps,” and the Irish in the “Emerald Isle of the Catskills.”⁹

The history of African American resorts like Smith Haven represented the starting point of my research. But it was clear that the story was about much more than just one overlooked segment of vacationers and resort owners in the Catskills. I therefore chose to focus on three groups: African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Italian Americans. The pages that follow trace the history of these resorts from their origins as modest boarding houses in the 1920s and 1930s, to their immense growth in popularity after World War II, to their decline in the final decades of the twentieth century. This study examines how resorts were shaped by and catered to the distinct social, cultural, and political needs of each group, and how these needs changed in relation to what was happening in vacationers’ New York City neighborhoods. It considers how resort owners and vacationers interacted with other racial and ethnic groups in the Catskills resort area, and how they interacted with the local, predominantly white communities they settled in. It also considers how, over the course of the twentieth century, the gradual assimilation of white ethnics and persistent discrimination toward racial minorities has influenced how we remember (or forget) the resort area’s diverse past.

⁹ Janis Benincasa, “Ethnic Resorts of the Catskills: A Project, a Process, a Product,” *New York Folklore Newsletter* 15, no. 2 (Summer 1994), 6.

All-American Vacationland

For most of the nineteenth century, only white middle-class or wealthy individuals could afford to vacation in the Catskill Mountains. The Catskills first gained popularity in the 1820s and 1830s. The opening of the Catskill Mountain House in 1824 inaugurated the first era of majestic resort hotels. Visitors reached the Mountain House by taking a steamboat along the Hudson River to the town of Catskill, and then a twelve-mile stagecoach completed the journey. The hotel became internationally known by the 1830s, offering wealthy urban visitors a stay at a luxurious hotel in the mountains' "wilderness" and dramatic views of the Hudson Valley.¹⁰ In the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of grand hotels, including the Catskill Mountain House, the Hotel Kaaterskill, and the Mohonk Mountain House, gave wealthy visitors seeking an escape from the ills of urban life an opportunity to enjoy all the comforts and luxuries of city living in a rural environment. This was far from "roughing it" in the wilderness.¹¹ Visitors to the mountains were treated to the fine foods, entertainment, and accommodations that

¹⁰ *Making Mountains*, 78-80.

¹¹ By the late nineteenth century, it became harder and harder to find pristine wilderness (or to ignore the reality that it did not exist) in the working landscapes of the Catskill Mountains. Officials in New York State ultimately sought to "create" wilderness in the Catskills to meet the recreational demands of urban New Yorkers. The establishment of the Catskill Park in 1904 helped fill this need, with the legislation designating that the land "shall be forever kept wild forest lands"—an ironic designation, given the fact that the mountains had long been home to various industries and trades. The Catskills would be preserved as a wilderness area for the benefit of New York's urban population, and this decision often came at the expense of local residents' needs. The history of the nineteenth century tourist trade in the Catskills reveals that the recreational demands of New York's urban population profoundly shaped the Catskills resort landscape from the start. See *Making Mountains*, 90 and 120-122.

they had come to expect in urban areas. These hotels helped make the Hudson Valley and the Catskill Mountains must-see destinations on the American Grand Tour, which included Niagara Falls, the Erie Canal, Lake George, the White Mountains, and the Connecticut River Valley.¹²

At the same time that the Catskill Mountains became popular among wealthy urban visitors, they also gained cultural significance in the American popular imagination.¹³ Cultural depictions of the Catskills, including the literature of Washington Irving and the mid-nineteenth century landscape paintings of Hudson River School artists Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, further boosted the local tourist trade. In the nineteenth century, Americans sought to ground the ideals bolstering American exceptionalism in tangible, visible expressions of American superiority. Because the country's landscape lacked the historical associations of Europe, nature was integral to the development of American identity.¹⁴ The dramatic wilderness landscapes that Thomas Cole painted were indeed a far cry from the real working landscapes of the Catskills, but they served culturally and symbolically as a "national landscape," which would help to unify a diverse society and grant legitimacy to the relatively new nation.¹⁵ As the potency of Washington

¹² John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (1989; repr., Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 56 and 66-68.

¹³ *Sacred Places*, 56-71, and *Making Mountains*, 46-47.

¹⁴ Angela Miller, "The Fate of Wilderness in American Landscape Art," in *American Wilderness: A New History*, ed. Michael Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 92.

¹⁵ Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825-1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 4 and 7.

Irving's 1819 "Rip Van Winkle" tale shows, Americans also craved the storied landscapes of the Old World. The dramatic scenery immortalized (and exaggerated) in the landscape paintings of Hudson River School artists, and the legends portrayed in the stories of Washington Irving would successfully lure visitors to the mountains throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.

Although these artists sought to make the Catskills a "national landscape," their efforts were largely irrelevant to the urban poor, nonwhites, and immigrants in the nineteenth century. This irrelevancy began to fade at the turn of the twentieth century. A growing number of racial and ethnic minorities associated the Catskills with the landscape of resorts and luxury established in previous decades, and now had the means to be a part of it. Racial and ethnic minorities began moving to and settling in the Catskills, and vacationing in the mountains became more accessible to New York City's working classes.¹⁶ Jewish immigrants were some of the first "new immigrants" to settle in the Catskills in the late 1800s. Many established farms and began taking boarders in the summertime to supplement their meager farm earnings. As Jewish immigrants from the city began visiting these boarding houses in greater numbers, it became clear that the tourist trade was more profitable than farming. The mountains were seen as a healthy respite from urban life, and over time, more working people took interest. Some visitors were individuals suffering from tuberculosis, consumption, and other maladies who headed to the mountains

¹⁶ Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for an American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 127.

to recover in the fresh mountain air.¹⁷ Labor unions also took note; the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) established a summer retreat, Unity House, near the town of Tannersville.¹⁸

Others followed. Despite the Great Depression, the number of racial and ethnic minorities vacationing at summer resorts increased substantially in the 1930s, thanks to the growth of paid vacation time for workers, an improved travel infrastructure, and the mountains' proximity to New York City. Resorts reached their height of popularity in the decades following World War II. African Americans, Italian Americans, and—beginning in the 1940s and 1950s—Puerto Ricans, joined thousands of other people in building their own recreation and leisure spaces in the mountains. Although these groups started visiting a bit later and in smaller numbers than their Jewish predecessors, they headed to the Catskills for many of the same reasons: to take a relaxing summer vacation, get away from the daily grind of labor, escape the oppressive heat of New York City in the summertime, and enjoy the social cachet of a trip to the mountains. Unlike the idealized “national landscape” of the nineteenth century Catskills, the twentieth century resort landscape reflected the nation’s considerable racial and ethnic diversity. By the second half of the twentieth century, the Catskill Mountains had become an all-American vacationland in the most literal sense.

Assimilation and group identity were in constant tension at summer resorts. Resorts offered an “in-group” setting in which racial and ethnic minorities could

¹⁷ *Making Mountains*, 189-190.

¹⁸ *A Summer World*, 52-53, 80-81.

enjoy music, dance, food, and games that catered to their distinct cultural tastes, while supporting business establishments run by men and women from ethnic and racial enclaves in New York City. Resorts also provided an important space for in-group networking and political and social organizing. At the same time, the ability to afford a family vacation signaled vacationers' ability to partake in postwar consumer culture like white middle-class Americans. Vacationing at resorts in the Catskills became a rite of passage for many upwardly mobile immigrants and racial minorities, and was representative of a broader trend in consumer culture: the "American family vacation."¹⁹

Even though summer resorts provided an insulated space for minority and immigrant groups to enjoy themselves, they were still a product of—and never fully insulated from—the racism and nativism of white society. In addition to accommodating urban visitors in the mountains, many Catskills resorts and communities were known to actively exclude and discriminate against "Undesirable Guests," particularly in the first half of the twentieth century.²⁰ Jews who began vacationing in the Catskills in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were the initial targets of discrimination. Historian Cindy S. Aron has vividly documented the discriminatory practices of the Mohonk Mountain House, near New Paltz in the Shawangunk Mountains. Mohonk, a Quaker establishment opened in the 1870s,

¹⁹ Susan Sessions Rugh describes the period beginning at the end of World War II and into the 1970s as "the golden age of family vacations." This periodization is consistent with the peak and decline of ethnic resorts in the Catskills. *Are We There Yet?*, 2.

²⁰ Cindy S. Aron, *Working At Play: A History of Vacations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 217.

sought to attract a very specific clientele—white, educated, Christian vacationers. Aron notes that, “Each year an update on the ‘Hebrew problem’ appeared in the house manager’s report . . .” In the early twentieth century, many resorts excluded Jewish visitors, and refused to take inquiries from those with “suspicious sounding names.”²¹ At many resorts, discrimination against Jews continued unabated well into the 1930s.²²

Other racial and ethnic minorities became targets of discrimination and harassment as they began settling, working, and vacationing in the Catskills in greater numbers. Discrimination left many wanting to create summer resorts where they could vacation in an insulated and welcoming environment, and fueled the establishment of more racially- and ethnically-specific resorts. Collectively, they helped create a highly segregated resort area that reflected, on an exaggerated scale, the racial, ethnic, and class divisions within New York City and the nation as a whole.

American identity has long rested on constructions of difference between those who are included and those who are excluded in the national community.²³ In the twentieth century, these dynamics were evident in the everyday interactions between racial minorities, European immigrants, and white, native-born residents

²¹ *Working at Play*, 217.

²² In the 1930s, many resorts still openly advertised their discriminatory policies towards Jews, stating, for example, “All churches nearby. Gentile clientele,” or simply, “Christians.” See for example the advertisements for “Soper’s-Pines-Inn” and “New Comston Park,” in Windham, New York, among many others in the “Brooklyn Daily Eagle Summer Resort and Travel Directory Section, 1939,” distributed with the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 4, 1939.

²³ George J. Sánchez, “Race, Nation, and Culture in Recent Immigration Studies,” *American Ethnic History* 18 (Summer 1999), 74.

of the Catskills. There were conflicts between local white residents and resort owners or vacationers; Italian Americans, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans all faced varying degrees of hostility when they began settling or vacationing in the Catskills. There were also tensions between white ethnic resort owners and nonwhite vacationers. Many resort owners refused to accommodate African American and Puerto Rican guests. The Catskill Mountains provide a unique setting for examining how the nation's racial hierarchy shaped constructions of group identity, both from within and without.

The Catskills landscape once held up as a unifying symbol of the United States was, by the twentieth century, much more representative of the nation's entrenched racial, ethnic, and class divisions. Over the course of the twentieth century, these divisions would be brought into sharp focus. Considered alongside one another, the histories of African American, Italian, and Puerto Rican resorts in the twentieth century demonstrate the growing acceptance of Italian Americans, who claimed their whiteness to gain acceptance in American society, and the persistent marginalization of African Americans and Puerto Ricans. In this sense, too, the resort landscape was "All-American"—a striking display of the country's deeply entrenched racial hierarchy.

Defining the Resort Area

The Catskill Park, established by the New York State Legislature in 1904, encompasses more than 705,000 acres of publicly- and privately-held land in Delaware, Green, Sullivan, and Ulster Counties. The 1904 law created a "blue line"

around the area to delineate the boundaries of the Catskill Mountain region as defined by the state.²⁴ The twentieth century vacationland extended well beyond these park borders. This study likewise utilizes a broader conception of “the Catskills,” as defined by resort owners and vacationers. The area under consideration encompasses three major areas of resort settlement: the northern parts of the Catskill Mountains proper, in Delaware, Greene, and Ulster Counties, the Shawangunk Mountain range in southern Ulster and northern Orange Counties, and east to the Town of Plattekill, bordering the Marlboro Mountains on one side and the Hudson River on the other. The Jewish resort area popularly known as the “Borscht Belt” or the “Sullivan County Catskills” is also part of this broad vacationland.²⁵ Despite disagreement today over where “The Catskills” begin and

²⁴ Norman J. Van Valkenburgh and Christopher W. Olney, *The Catskill Park: Inside the Blue Line* (Hensonville, NY: Black Dome Press, 2004), 17; *Making Mountains*, 122.

²⁵ The Jewish resort area lies largely outside the geographic and analytical boundaries of this dissertation, however, and is therefore not discussed in great detail. The history of Jewish resorts in the Catskills has been well documented: Jewish resorts have been examined in fiction, including Abraham Cahan’s *The Rise of David Levinsky* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1917) and Eileen Pollack’s *Paradise, New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998). Contemporary television shows such as *The Goldbergs* (1949-1956) included references to the resorts, and they have been portrayed in more recent films such as *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Sweet Lorraine* (1987), and *A Walk on the Moon* (1999). Tania Grossinger’s *Growing up at Grossinger’s* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2008), and Phil Brown’s *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat’s Memories of the Great Jewish Resort Area* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998) are representative examples of the memoirs that have been written about Jewish experiences in the Catskills.

There are also a few in-depth academic studies of the Jewish resorts in Sullivan County. Recent work by historians David Stradling and Susan Sessions Rugh have included important scholarly examinations of the resorts within their larger works about the relationship between New York City and the Catskills, and the popularity of family vacations in postwar America, respectively. Stefan Kanfer’s 1989 book, *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, from*

end, all of these areas should be considered part of the Catskill recreational landscape.²⁶

In the northernmost part of the Catskills, the mountains are steep and the vistas dramatic. These qualities helped make the northern Catskills the epicenter of the nineteenth century tourist trade, home to grand hotels with spectacular views of the mountains and the Hudson River. The area was popularized by the nineteenth century paintings of Hudson River School artists like Thomas Cole and Asher B. Durand, and the stories of author Washington Irving. In the late nineteenth century it became home to some of the first Jewish boarding houses, and in the 1920s, the earliest African American and Italian boarding houses.²⁷ One of the earliest African American boarding houses, Jessie's Manna Farms, was owned by Jules Bledsoe and located in Roxbury, New York, at the northwest edge of the Catskill Mountains.²⁸ This region also became home to a number of European American resorts,

the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), and Phil Brown's *In the Catskills: A Century of Jewish Experience in "The Mountains"* provide the only two book-length historical examinations of Jewish resorts in the Catskill Mountains.

²⁶ Local historian and Catskills expert Alf Evers notes, "I once asked an old man who lived within the shadow of Plattekill Mountain just where the Catskills began. 'You keep going,' he said, 'until you get to where there's two stones to every dirt. Then, b' Jesus you're there.'" Alf Evers, *The Catskills: From Wilderness to Woodstock*, rev. ed., (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1982), 2.

²⁷ The earliest Jewish vacationers were largely German Jews, and they vacationed primarily in the northern Catskills. Further south in Ulster County, however, Griffin's Corners became particularly popular after the Hungarian Jewish businessman Charles Fleischmann (the wealthy co-founder of the Fleischmann's Yeast company) built a mansion to entertain guests in the summertime. The town was renamed Fleischmanns soon after. *Making Mountains*, 182-183.

²⁸ According to Alf Evers, the commonly accepted northwest boundary of the Catskills is in Stamford, New York, a town just northwest of Roxbury in Delaware County. *The Catskills*, 4.

particularly those catering to Irish, German, and Italian vacationers. Germans tended to vacation in the towns of Round Top and Purling, and the Irish in Leeds and East Durham. Italian resorts, sometimes referred to collectively as the “Bocce Belt,” were clustered primarily in the towns of Cairo, Acra, Hunter, and Haines Falls.

The Shawangunk Mountains (pronounced *shong-gum*) are located south of the Catskill Mountains in Ulster, Sullivan, and Orange Counties. African American resorts were dotted throughout the mountains, along the Shawangunk Ridge, and into the rolling hills of Orange County. Many of these resorts were clustered on or near U.S. Route 209, which runs through a valley between the southern Catskill Mountains and the scenic Shawangunk Ridge as it finds its way south from Kingston. Along the way to the Pennsylvania border, U.S. Route 209 passes through Kerhonkson, Ellenville, Cuddebackville, and Port Jervis.²⁹ One African American columnist for the *New York Age* joked that instead of getting their kicks on Route 66, black vacationers were “bumper to bumper, forming a line, heading straight for 209.”³⁰ Black resorts were also located on the other, southeastern, side of the Shawangunk Ridge, in the area around the towns of Pine Bush, Burlingham, and Bloomingburg.

Driving thirty minutes southeast of Kerhonkson along U.S. Route 44/New York Route 55 brings you to the Town of Plattekill, known as “the gateway to” or “foothills of” the Catskill Mountains. Located in southern Ulster County, the Town of

²⁹ Marc B. Fried’s *Shawangunk: Adventure, Exploration, History and Epiphany from a Mountain Wilderness* (published by the author, 1998) provides a valuable introduction to the Shawangunk Mountains.

³⁰ Edwina Johnson, “Round The Resorts,” *New York Age*, July 4, 1953.

Plattekill is comprised of five hamlets: Plattekill, Modena, Ardonia, Clintondale, and New Hurley. The town's name comes from the Platte Kill ("kill" being Dutch for "stream") that flows through the area. The bucolic agricultural landscape dominated by apple orchards made it an attractive destination for vacationers from New York City, and boarding houses catering to urban tourists first opened in the area in the late 1800s and early 1900s.³¹ As was common throughout the Catskills resort area, many of these boarding houses changed hands (and ethnic groups) several times over the course of the twentieth century. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Spanish and Italian immigrants established boarding houses in Plattekill. By the 1950s, the Spanish boarding houses, known collectively as Las Villas, had a large and growing number of Puerto Rican visitors, and most eventually turned over to Puerto Rican ownership. Despite the presence of Italian resorts, the town came to be known primarily as the "Spanish Alps" or "Puerto Rican Alps."

In the postwar decades resort proprietors in the Plattekill area and in the Shawangunk Mountains frequently advertised their resorts as being *in* "the Catskills," despite being located some distance from the Catskill Park. Visiting tourists also identified these resorts as being in the Catskills. Resort owners certainly recognized the financial benefits of associating their properties with the famous mountain resort area, and tourists recognized the social prestige associated with a trip to the Catskills. All of the resorts discussed in this dissertation are part of the broad Catskills recreational landscape that spans Orange, Ulster, Sullivan,

³¹ Elizabeth Werlau, *Plattekill* (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcardia Publishing, 2008), 81.

Greene, and Delaware counties in upstate New York. This usage is predicated on the recognition that “the Catskills” are as much a cultural construction as a literal place on the map [Figure 2].³²

³² The Catskills made famous by Jewish resorts in the mid-twentieth century were in Sullivan County, quite a distance from the Catskills of nineteenth century fame (which were further north). As David Stradling has argued, “that region gradually lost a secure claim to its own name” as the Jewish resort area came to be known by the broader public as *the* Catskills. This process of “moving mountains,” however, was not limited to Jewish resorts—African Americans, Italians, Spaniards, and Puerto Ricans did the same in the Plattekill area and in the Shawangunk Mountains. *Making Mountains*, 180.



Figure 2. Map showing areas of resort settlement in the Catskill Mountains, ca. 1920 - 1980. Italian resorts clustered in the Northern Catskills in towns including Cairo and Leeds (shaded blue); African American resorts clustered along Route 209 from Cuddebackville to Kerhonkson and in Roxbury, in the northwest Catskills (shaded red); and Puerto Rican, Spanish, and Italian resorts clustered in the Town of Plattekill (shaded green). Base map, "New York," R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1968.

Since the nineteenth century, people and events in New York City have dramatically shaped tourism in the mountains.³³ The vast majority of resort owners came from the New York metropolitan area. Some owners chose to settle permanently in the Catskills, while others moved upstate for the summer and lived in the city the remainder of the year. Resorts vacationers, too, came primarily from New York City. Because resort life was dramatically influenced by the social, cultural, and political conditions of life in New York City, my analysis moves frequently between the two locations. Vacationers' and resort owners' experiences at summer resorts cannot be considered in isolation from their lives in New York City or its suburbs.

A Note on Sources

When I first began researching for this dissertation, I was concerned that there would not be enough source material to write about some of the less well-known groups that vacationed in the Catskills. A little digging, however, quickly proved me wrong. This dissertation draws on a diverse range of sources, including

³³ I am heavily indebted to the work of environmental historian David Stradling, whose *Making Mountains* convincingly demonstrates the process by which urban cultural needs and urban politics profoundly transformed the Catskills landscape—including the need for natural resources and rural recreational spaces. Stradling's discussion of ethnic resorts focuses solely on Jewish resorts in the Catskills, however, and his analysis is primarily from an environmental history perspective. He argues that, "by catering to urban tourists, the Catskills became a remarkably urbanized landscape." *Making Mountains*, 79. David J. Walbert's *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish, and the Selling of Rural America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and William Cronon's *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1991) similarly demonstrate how rural landscapes are shaped by the needs of nearby urban populations.

oral history interviews, contemporary newspaper articles and advertisements, postcards, travel brochures, family photographs, personal papers, and memoirs.

Newspapers have proved to be one of the most fruitful sources of information about Catskills resorts in the twentieth century. African American newspapers, including the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *New York Age*, New York City's Italian-language newspaper *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, and the city's Spanish-language newspaper, *La Prensa*, have all been integral to tracing the (relative) number, size, and popularity of the resorts over the course of the twentieth century. Each newspaper featured large numbers of advertisements for summer resorts in the Catskills, as well as society pages that regularly updated readers about the goings-on and visitors of note at the resorts. Non-ethnic New York City newspapers, like the *New York Times* and the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, as well as local newspapers in the Catskills and Hudson Valley including the *Catskill Mountain News*, the *Kingston Daily Freeman*, and the *Newburgh-Beacon News* provided insight into how African American, Puerto Rican, and Italian resorts were viewed by dominant white populations both in New York City and in the Catskills. Local newspapers, in particular, provided a window into the frequent conflicts between white local residents, resort owners, and vacationers.

Postcards and travel brochures also provide invaluable source material, despite generally portraying an idealized version of resort life. The resorts frequently appeared cleaner, more modern, and more luxurious on paper than they did in reality. This phenomenon provides valuable information about what resort owners were trying to emphasize in their promotional material. By "reading"

postcard and brochure images, we can identify what vacationers were looking for in a resort vacation, what amenities they deemed most important and attractive, and what resort owners' ideal guests looked like. For example, there are no African American guests in white ethnic resort promotional literature, although there are occasionally white guests in African American resort promotional material. Early resort postcards from the 1930s and early 1940s tended to portray idyllic nature scenes with farm animals, trees, or natural swimming holes. The postwar decades' postcards tended to portray stylish people lounging around swimming pools and dancing in resort nightclubs, or displayed modern resort lobbies and bedroom accommodations, all with luxurious furnishings. A comparison of these kinds of images suggests that the form and function of Catskills vacations changed dramatically in the post-World War II period.

Several archival collections proved particularly helpful in piecing together the history of individual resorts, and in defining the relationships between resorts and local communities. The Texas Collection at Baylor University in Waco, Texas and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City both hold the papers of Jules Bledsoe, an African American singer who owned a resort in Roxbury, New York during the 1920s and 1930s. These papers were integral to outlining the history of African American resorts in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as illustrating the violence and hostility that many black resort owners faced when they first moved to the Catskills. The New York State Archives holds the papers of the New York State Commission Against Discrimination (SCAD), and the New York State Police's Non-Criminal Investigation Files, which were essential in illuminating

the persistence of discrimination against African American vacationers in the Catskills well into the 1950s, and describing the conflicts between Puerto Ricans and local police in Plattekill, respectively.

Last but not least, I conducted oral history interviews with sixteen people of varying racial, ethnic, generational, and class backgrounds. Interviewees included the children of resort owners, who almost always worked at the resorts as children and teenagers, as well as former resort employees, vacationers, and local residents of the towns where resorts were located. I have also drawn on a number of oral history interviews conducted by others. The Smithsonian Institution's Jazz Oral History Project interviewed the African American tap dancer and resort owner Clayton "Peg Leg" Bates before his death in 1998, and the Delaware County Historical Association in Delhi, New York conducted a number of interviews in the early 1990s about ethnic resorts in the Catskills, including interviews with African American, Puerto Rican, and Italian resort owners. Oral histories provide a valuable means for learning about the lives of ordinary people who, by virtue of not being famous (or infamous), are often not represented in traditional archival records. They have been integral to telling the history of ethnic resorts in the Catskills.

I traversed the Catskills resort landscape over and over again in the course of my research, crisscrossing the mountains to piece together a more complete history of the resort area in the twentieth century. After several years of scouring formal archives and family collections, conducting oral histories, and surveying the remains

of the resort landscape, I have learned to see the landscape of my childhood differently. Smith Haven's built environment had a very different meaning for the travelers it originally welcomed. In the decades following World War II, the pool offered African American tourists an amenity they were often denied elsewhere. The brass number on my bedroom door signified that visitors could secure a hotel room without being turned away. The bungalow provided a healthy respite in the natural environment, far from the city. The resorts' absence in local memory reflects the reality that the resort landscape was not always welcoming to racial and ethnic minorities. Acknowledgment of these resorts requires an acknowledgement that the history of the resort area is marked by deep and persistent racism.

Bringing these diverse narratives together is an essential next step in understanding the significance of the Catskills resort area to working people in the twentieth century. The resort landscape had "shared meanings" for the many different cultural and ethnic groups that summered there.³⁴ The sense of community and reinforcement of a common group identity at the resorts ensured that many vacationers and resort owners felt a strong attachment to the mountains, which many said reminded them of "home"—whether that was Puerto Rico, Italy, Ireland, or elsewhere. In order to understand the broad historical importance of this cultural landscape, however, we need to first sketch out a history of its many diverse parts.

³⁴ Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 11.

One concern in particular has plagued me throughout this research. As a whole, these resorts provided overwhelmingly positive experiences for vacationers, owners, and employees. Interviewees enthusiastically reminisced about their experiences at the resorts, emphasizing what wonderful times they had. My narrative includes an analysis of racial and ethnic tension that may have been invisible to some vacationers, not a central preoccupation for others, or unconsciously suppressed by historical memory. Most Italians would never have encountered an African American seeking to stay at an Italian resort. African Americans were well aware of the discrimination they might face at resorts that were not black-owned and patronized. At the same time, this discrimination was not at the forefront of their minds when they were staying at Peg Leg Bates Country Club or Paradise Farm resort. These were vacations spots, after all, and people were there to enjoy themselves. Examining these resorts from a comparative perspective illuminates broader dynamics that were not always evident at the individual level. My analysis incorporates both aspects of this history—the pleasures that resort vacations provided to these individuals, and the reality that the divisions apparent in the resort landscape reflected broader racial, ethnic, and class divisions in American society as a whole.

CHAPTER 1

MIGRATION TO THE MOUNTAINS, 1920 - 1945

On September 12, 1938, twenty-year-old Dion Norwood sat down and penned a gushing letter to Jules Bledsoe, a famous African American musician and owner of Jessie's Manna Farms, a summer resort in Roxbury, New York. Norwood had recently returned from Jessie's Manna Farms to his apartment in East Harlem.¹ He wrote to thank Bledsoe for a wonderful vacation and to assure him that he enjoyed an uneventful trip back home:

My journey homewards was very pleasant. The bus fare from Margaretville to Kingston was \$1.55. The fare on the Day Line [ferry] from Kingston to N.Y. was \$1.25.

I certainly miss the fragrant air of the Catskills. The mountains have taught me (as you said they would) to appreciate God's green earth. The city appears to be drab and colorless, Central Park which was always considered by me a green paradise in this maze of concrete, glass, and steel, does not appeal to me as much as it did before I went away. Mother is pleased with my healthful appearance she always mentions that I owe it all to you.²

Norwood's experience paralleled that of many first-time vacationers to the Catskill Mountains. He was part of a growing number of racial and ethnic minorities from New York City who began vacationing in rural areas north of New York City in the

¹ Norwood's age is estimated based on the 1940 census, which listed him as being 22 years old. United States Federal Census of 1940, NARA microfilm publication T627, roll 2659, New York, New York, Enumeration District 31-1497, sheet 4A, East 112th Street, household of Mary McNeill, accessed online at Ancestry.com, November 29, 2012.

² Dion Norwood to Jules Bledsoe, September 12, 1938, box 2G72, folder 3, Jules Bledsoe Papers, The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, Texas (hereafter cited as Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection).

interwar period. His trip to the mountains was facilitated by an expanding travel infrastructure that, by the late 1930s, made the trip relatively affordable and stress-free for those traveling by car, bus, ferry, riverboat, rail, or some combination thereof. He was drawn, like many vacationers before and after, by the opportunity to temporarily escape the crowded neighborhoods and “concrete, glass, and steel” of New York City for a respite in the cool air and scenic landscape of the Catskill Mountains. He returned home feeling healthier, well rested, and newly appreciative of nature and the rural environment—and perhaps even a bit jaded about his urban surroundings back home.

At the turn of the twentieth century, immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe began migrating to New York City in large numbers.³ Italians and Russian Jews made up the vast majority of this wave of “new immigrants,” drawn to the United States by the prospect of better jobs, and the lack thereof in their home countries. Italian immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno*, or Southern Italy, first arrived in the United States in large numbers in the 1880s, and by 1914 approximately four million Italians had entered the country.⁴ Most came into the United States through Ellis Island and many settled in New York City. Despite coming from Italy, these immigrants did not arrive with a strong sense of Italian national identity. Italy had only become a unified nation in 1861, and most migrants identified primarily with

³ Some of my research about Italian Americans in the Catskills in this and subsequent chapters was previously published in a journal article. See Laura A. Miller, “Italian Americans in the ‘Bocce Belt’: ‘Old World’ memories and ‘New World’ Identities,” *National Identities* 15, No. 1 (March 2013), 33-49.

⁴ Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women’s Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 67.

regional and local affiliations.⁵ They settled alongside other Italians from the same village or region of Italy in urban neighborhoods from East Harlem to lower Manhattan.⁶

African Americans from the South also began moving to northern cities in the 1910s and 1920s, beginning a decades-long migration process that lasted until the 1970s. Many of these early black migrants sought to escape the violence and brutality of Southern racism, and were lured by an increase in manufacturing jobs brought by both World War I and restrictive immigration legislation in 1921 and 1924.⁷ During the same time period, African American musical, literary, and artistic talents from around the country were also flocking to New York City's Harlem.

⁵ Jennifer Guglielmo, "Introduction: White Lies, Dark Truths," in Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 10.

⁶ Historian Jennifer Guglielmo helpfully outlines these strikingly specific settlement patterns in early twentieth century New York City: "Neapolitans settled along Mulberry Street between Canal and Broome Streets, generally according to village and province. Calabrians lived on Mott between Grand and Broome. Abruzzesi settled on upper Mulberry Street near Spring Street. Immigrants from one particular village in Apulia settled on two blocks along Hester Street between Prince and Houston. Genovesi settled on Baxter Street in the Five Points area, while Sicilians made Elizabeth and Prince Streets home. The largest Italian neighborhood uptown, in East Harlem, was considered the city's "Little Italy." Here, Neapolitans settled from 106th to 108th Street; those from Basilicata lived between 108th and 115th Streets; Calabresi lived on East 109th Street; and some streets, like 112th and 107th, were home to immigrants from specific villages or neighborhoods of Bari, Palermo, and Naples." *Living the Revolution*, 100.

⁷ Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010), 10. Wilkerson's book provides a valuable in-depth history of the African American Great Migration.

Collectively, these talented African Americans were part of what came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance.⁸

In the 1920s and 1930s, Italians and African Americans became part of another migration, this time moving out of New York City. Each summer saw a steady and growing stream of New Yorkers headed out of the city to nearby vacation destinations. Beachgoers preferring sun, sand, and surf ventured to various points along the Long Island coast, or to New Jersey's many beach destinations from Asbury Park to Atlantic City.⁹ Those favoring higher altitudes, mountain breezes, streams, lakes, and forests headed west to Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains or north to New York's Catskill Mountains. The Catskill Mountains became a particularly popular destination for racial and ethnic minorities. Affluent whites had been vacationing at mountain resorts since the 1820s, but at the turn of the twentieth century, Jewish immigrants from New York City began purchasing and frequenting mountain boarding houses in earnest.¹⁰ Other racial and ethnic minorities soon followed, creating a remarkably diverse resort landscape in the Catskills.

⁸ For in-depth examinations of the Harlem Renaissance, see Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, updated ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); and David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (1981; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁹ "Resort Routes Multiply," *New York Times*, November 15, 1936. For an in-depth look at the history of Atlantic City as a tourist destination, see Bryant Simon, *Boardwalk of Dreams: Atlantic City and the Fate of Urban America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ For discussions of the earliest Jewish resorts in the Catskills, see Betsy Blackmar, "Going to the Mountains: A Social History," in *Resorts of the Catskills*, 82-87; *A Summer World*, Chapters 4 and 5; *Making Mountains*, Chapter 6.

This chapter provides a comparative look at the growth of African American and Italian boarding houses and resorts in the Catskill Mountains in the 1920s and 1930s. (Because Puerto Ricans did not begin vacationing in the resort area in significant numbers until after World War II, they enter the discussion beginning in Chapter 2.) Italians and African Americans experienced significant discrimination in their everyday lives. These groups both sought recreational spaces outside the city where they could foster and sustain a sense of community and pride in a welcoming, yet insulated environment. Resorts offered a space for guests to enjoy familiar food, dance, music, and games, while simultaneously supporting establishments run by businessmen and women from within their ethnic and racial enclaves. The mountain resorts offered African American and Italian resort owners and patrons an escape, whether permanent or fleeting, from life and labor in New York City.

The idea of a country “escape” had multiple meanings for African Americans and Italians in New York City. For less prosperous proprietors, operating and sustaining a boarding house required tremendous labor, but was *theirs*; they owned it, and they could do with it as they saw fit. It was an appealing alternative to wage labor in the city, and allowed them a degree of self-sufficiency that was unlikely in an urban area. Owning or visiting a boarding house in the mountains offered an escape into an idealized and often imaginary rural past, provoking nostalgia for rural landscapes and contact with the natural environment in the Italian homeland or the American South. For vacationers, resorts and boarding houses offered even greater escapism. The mountains existed primarily for their health, enjoyment, and recreational pleasure, and vacationing helped them cope with the daily grind of

laboring in the city. The resorts also offered a forward-looking “escape.” The ability to afford a visit to a summer resort or own a summer home was a sign of economic and social status. Engaging in these rites of American consumer culture and citizenship allowed these racial and ethnic minorities to assert their status and citizenship in a society that regularly denied them full equality.

Vacationing grew increasingly accessible to, and popular among, working- and middle-class people of diverse backgrounds in the 1920s and 1930s. The popularity of the Catskill Mountains was bolstered by the strength of the economy after World War I, an improved travel infrastructure, and the variety of transportation options available to vacationers.¹¹ Vacationers had been taking the railroad from the city to the mountains since the mid-nineteenth century, and they continued to do so in the 1920s and 1930s. Visitors heading to the Sullivan County Catskills took the New York, Ontario and Western Railway from Weehawken, New Jersey. Vacationers headed to the northern Catskills took the New York Central Railroad to Kingston and connected to the Ulster and Delaware Railroad. Other visitors came on the Hudson River Day Line, a steamboat line on the Hudson River from New York City to Kingston and other river cities.¹² The greatest change in transportation came in the 1920s, when a growing number of vacationers began visiting the mountains by automobile. Car ownership increased significantly among

¹¹ *Making Mountains*, 190-193.

¹² “Near-By Heights Beckon,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1935.

working-class vacationers during the 1920s, and those who did not own vehicles found an affordable alternative in buses.¹³ Improved and expanded highways made driving to the mountains much easier and faster than ever before.¹⁴

The growing phenomenon of paid vacations further contributed to the increased popularity of the Catskills among working-class vacationers in the early twentieth century. World War I increased employers' interest in corporate welfare policies, and a small but growing number of companies began offering paid vacations during the 1920s. By the end of the 1930s most members of the working class had secured the benefit. These policies were driven by the belief that paid vacations would make employees happy, which would in turn boost reliability and productivity. The increasing availability of paid vacation time to workers in the second half of the 1930s helped to sustain and even grow the vacationing industry in the midst of the Great Depression.¹⁵

There was a brief decline in vacationing after the 1929 stock market crash. Millions of Americans were laid off from their jobs, and vacationing became impossible, or a low priority, for many workers. The pain was short-lived for the Catskill Mountain resort area as a whole during the Great Depression; by the mid-

¹³ *Working At Play*, 209 and *Making Mountains*, 193.

¹⁴ The growing trend of "Motoring to the Catskills" was perfectly summed up by the subtitle of a 1925 *New York Times* article: "Excellent Highways, Mountain Scenery and Cheerful Recreation Centres Make Strong Appeal to the Summer Road Tourists." "Motoring to the Catskills Increasing in Popularity," *New York Times*, June 21, 1925.

¹⁵ *Working At Play*, 184, 197-198, 238, 246-247.

1930s, the tourism business began to forcefully rebound.¹⁶ This was partially due to the area's proximity to New York City, which made it an affordable choice for vacationers taking budget-friendly vacations. For most families, a quick jaunt upstate was much more feasible than a journey to a faraway place. For working-class vacationers from the city, the availability of bus travel was also essential to making the mountains accessible.¹⁷ Although still out of reach for many New Yorkers, vacationing grew so popular that by the end of the 1930s it was "well on its way to becoming a mass phenomenon."¹⁸

Summer resorts were part of a burgeoning "leisure culture" that developed in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁹ In New York City, working-class people increasingly spent their free time going to parks, movies, dance halls, amusement parks, and beaches. For those who could afford it, a vacation in the mountains offered a particularly appealing opportunity to get away from the daily grind of manual labor and intense summer heat and humidity in New York City.

¹⁶ This was true for the vacation industry in the United States more broadly after the 1929 stock market crash; after a brief dip immediately after the crash, vacationing continued to grow steadily in the 1930s. This was, in part, due to the growth of paid vacation time for workers. *Working at Play*, 238-240.

¹⁷ *Making Mountains*, 191.

¹⁸ *Working At Play*, 182.

¹⁹ Jennifer Fronc, "The Horns of the Dilemma: Race Mixing and the Enforcement of Jim Crow in New York City," *Journal of Urban History* 33, no. 1 (November 2006), 4. Other historians including Kathy Peiss, John Kasson, and Roy Rosenzweig have documented the urban leisure pursuits of the working class at the turn of the twentieth century. See Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978); and Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

The temperature was no small concern to residents of New York City.

Summers in the city were *hot*. Playwright Arthur Miller vividly recalled the grueling conditions that New York City garment workers faced during the heat waves of the 1930s:

My father had a small coat factory on Thirty-ninth Street then, with about a dozen men working sewing machines. Just to watch them handling thick woolen winter coats in that heat was, for me, a torture. The cutters were on piecework, paid by the number of seams they finished, so their lunch break was short—fifteen or twenty minutes. . . . The men sweated a lot in those lofts, and I remember one working who had a peculiar way of dripping. He was a tiny fellow, who disdained scissors, and, at the end of a seam, always bit off the thread instead of cutting it, so that inch-long strands stuck to his lower lip, and by the end of the day he had a multicolored beard. His sweat poured onto those thread ends and dripped down onto the cloth, which he was constantly blotting with a rag.²⁰

In the days before air conditioning, New Yorkers were eager—desperate, even—to flee their stifling homes and cramped, sweat-soaked workplaces for a temporary respite in the mountains or at nearby beaches. They saved diligently all year to afford a brief escape each summer, and there were many boarding houses and resorts eager to oblige.

Early boarding houses in the Catskills shared a number of characteristics. Regardless of which racial and ethnic groups they catered to, most were small, intimate spaces that accommodated an equally small number of guests who came for a week or two at a time. When men could not take weekdays off from work, they often left their wives and children at the boarding houses during the week and

²⁰ Arthur Miller, “Before Air-Conditioning,” *The New Yorker*, June 22, 1998, accessed July 19, 2013, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1998/06/22/1998_06_22_144_TNY_LIBRY_00015831?currentPage=1.

returned to join them each weekend. Guests spent their days enjoying the house grounds, sitting on the porch or in the parlor, listening to music, and playing games. They might leave the property to go motoring around the area and take in the rural scenery, or drive to a local swimming hole to take a dip in the water. Although there was usually some kind of nighttime entertainment at the boarding houses, these were not high-intensity vacations. Above all, the emphasis was on rest and relaxation in the scenic, healthful mountain environment.

Some of the first boarding houses were year-round farms that took in visitors during the summer months. Farming in the Catskills was notoriously unprofitable; the rocky soil made it nearly impossible to grow crops on a large scale.²¹ Luckily, farm life itself was part of the appeal for vacationers in the early twentieth century. Boarding house owners could generally grow enough vegetables for their guests, and provided milk and eggs from their cows and chickens. By marketing “farm vacations” to potential guests, a farmer could “exploit ‘products’ of the farm that he could not otherwise sell at all—‘his pure spring water, clear fresh air, and beautiful scenery . . . at retail price.’”²² Boarding house owners of all races and ethnicities capitalized on these rural “products” well into the twentieth century. They beckoned urban visitors with the promise of a relaxing, natural retreat, a healthier, simpler way of life, and all the fresh food, water, and air that farm life had to offer.

²¹ Dairy farming was a more viable alternative in the Catskills, but many dairy farmers also took in boarders each summer to supplement their household incomes.

²² Dona Brown, *Inventing New England: Regional Tourism in the Nineteenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 145.

Immigrant and nonwhite vacationers relied heavily on in-group communication networks to identify establishments where they would feel welcome. Boarding house owners advertised their businesses extensively in ethnic newspapers: Italian resorts could be found in New York City's Italian-language paper, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, Spanish resorts in *La Prensa*, and Irish resorts in the *Irish Echo*. African American establishments were similarly advertised in black newspapers including the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *New York Age*. Many resort owners also relied heavily on word of mouth recommendations, which were often the best and most effective means of securing new customers.

The existence of and need for these diverse advertising venues underscores a crucial fact: vacationing was *not* an integrated activity. European immigrant and African American men and women carved out their own distinct recreational spaces that catered to the needs of people much like themselves. African Americans, in particular, would have avoided resorts owned and frequented by their white immigrant counterparts. Even in New York—one of the first states to enact a public accommodation law in 1873—civil rights protections on paper did little to guarantee access in practice.²³ The Catskills resort landscape was strikingly segregated by race, ethnicity, and class, and this segregation became increasingly apparent as more and more racial and ethnic minorities began vacationing in the

²³ New York was second only to Massachusetts in enacting a public accommodation statute. Evan Friss, "Blacks, Jews, and Civil Rights Law in New York, 1895-1913," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, (Summer 2005), 72.

Catskills in the 1920s and 1930s.²⁴ Even though resort enclaves provided a safe space for members of these groups to enjoy themselves, they were still a product of—and never fully insulated from—the racism and anti-immigrant sentiments of native-born whites.

Italian Boarding Houses

Many of the first Italian migrants to the United States were young Southern Italian men looking for temporary employment. Once in the country, they saved money to send to their families back in Italy with the hope of eventually returning themselves. Nearly sixty percent of Italian immigrants who came to the United States between 1908 and 1923 ultimately returned to Italy.²⁵ Those Italian immigrants who decided to stay similarly sent money back home, but in this case, to facilitate other family members' immigration to the United States. Of the Italian immigrants who settled in New York City, many Italian women found jobs in the garment industry, while Italian men tended to fill jobs in the railroad industry and construction trades.²⁶

Italian immigrants began moving to the Catskill Mountains in noticeable numbers in the late 1800s and early 1900s. These were also largely young male laborers who were recruited for work opportunities in construction, mining, agriculture, and other industries. According to the 1900 United States Federal Census, the towns of Coxsackie and Catskill, along the Hudson River bordering the

²⁴ In the words of historian Cindy Aron, vacationing usually “reinforced rather than diminished social distinctions.” *Working At Play*, 222.

²⁵ Thomas A. Guglielmo, *White On Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 16.

²⁶ *Living the Revolution*, 44-45, 67, 69 – 70.

Northern Catskill Mountains, both had large populations of Italian male laborers. Most were identified as railroad workers, brickyard workers, or more generically, day laborers. In the nearby town of Cairo, a small number of Italian men found employment in a shale mine.²⁷ Patterns of labor recruitment and chain migration ensured that here, too, most Italians lived in the same neighborhoods and often, in the same homes.²⁸ Although many of these workers were transient, and returned to New York City (or Italy) when their employment ended, others chose to settle permanently in rural areas in the Hudson Valley and Catskill Mountains.²⁹

The record of early Italian immigrants in the Catskills is thin, but we do know how local residents of the Catskills responded to their arrival. They greeted Italian

²⁷ For example, there were Italian laborers living as boarders in the household of Joseph Degovia in Catskill; see United States Federal Census of 1900, roll 1038, Greene County, New York, Catskill, Enumeration District 0071, sheet 15B, 43 Hill Street, household of Joseph Degovia, accessed online at Ancestry.com, January 5, 2014. There were six Italian shale miners living in the Greene County Almshouse in Cairo; see United States Federal Census of 1900, roll 1038, Greene County, New York, Cairo, Enumeration District 0069, sheet 11B, Greene County Almshouse, accessed online at Ancestry.com, January 5, 2014.

²⁸ Many Italian households took in boarders to supplement their family's incomes and provide lodging for their countrymen. This was common for Italian immigrants in general, and Italians in Catskill and Coxsackie were no exception. Diane Vecchio, "Ties of Affection: Family Narratives in the History of Italian Migration," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 25, No. 2/3 (Winter-Spring 2006), 123.

²⁹ This pattern was repeated throughout areas in upstate New York. In Ryan Rudnicki's article, "Patterns of Italian Immigrant Settlement," Rudnicki describes a similar pattern in Western New York: "Other Italians came into this agricultural region as day laborers on railroad projects and on the expansion of the Erie Barge Canal. Most likely, immigrants obtained these jobs through *padroni*. Subsequently, they learned of available farmland near their construction work and purchased it." "Patterns of Italian Immigrant Settlement," in Rudolph J. Vecoli, ed., *Italian Immigrants in Rural and Small Town America: Essays from the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association* (Staten Island, NY: Italian American Historical Association, 1987), 16.

laborers with the customary nativist hostility afforded to “new” immigrants, and their disdain is apparent in local newspaper articles. When the *Catskill Mountain News* acknowledged Italians’ presence at all, they were usually highly caricatured, appearing as violent criminals and—less often—as the victims of criminals (who were often other Italians).³⁰ These were common tropes in newspaper articles about Italians at the turn of the twentieth century, and these stories worked to emphasize the inferiority of southern Italian immigrants.³¹ White Protestants considered Italian immigrants, like other “new” immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, to be foreign, backwards, and inassimilable.

In articles in the *Catskill Mountain News*, Catskill natives also expressed grave concerns about Italians’ apparent penchant for pothunting and other violations of local game laws. This was a particular concern because the local economy was reliant on tourism and resource revenues derived from the natural environment. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the *Catskill Mountain News* published articles about Italians fishing illegally, killing robins, and evading and ignoring the authority of local game protectors.³² In 1906, the newspaper reported that a local resident witnessed Italians killing fish with a stick of dynamite in the East Branch of

³⁰ One article in the *Catskill Mountain News* with the headline “Italian War at Pepacton Wednesday” recounted a fight between three railroad workers: two Sicilian brothers and one “Roman dago.” The four-paragraph article failed to give the men’s names, noting that the brothers had “names [that] are unpronounceable.” “Italian War at Pepacton Wednesday,” *Catskill Mountain News*, October 6, 1911.

³¹ *Living the Revolution*, 93–98.

³² “The Game Protectors,” *Catskill Mountain News*, July 18, 1913; “Here and There: Minor Happenings of Interest in This Section of the State,” *Catskill Mountain News*, July 28, 1916; “Pays Fine of \$500 for Killing Robins,” *Catskill Mountain News*, May 2, 1919.

the Delaware River: “A terrific explosion was heard, and he saw them gather up large quantities of fish from the water and walk away.” The journalist’s emphasis on the presence of “dagoes” using “dynamite” undoubtedly alarmed local residents by playing on well-established fears of Italian anarchists and radicals.³³ The men were seen as a dire threat to the health of the summer tourist trade, which relied heavily on city residents who enjoyed fishing — “To destroy this sport much sought by city people means a discontinuance of their annual vacation visits and the destruction of a great enterprise.”³⁴

The concerns expressed by residents of the Catskills were representative of broader, national concerns about the behavior of Italian immigrants. Many native-born Americans condemned Italian immigrants’ hunting and foraging practices as uncouth and un-American.³⁵ In urban and rural areas alike, Italian women scoured fields and forests gathering wild plants, mushrooms, and berries for food and medicinal remedies.³⁶ Italian men were vilified for pothunting, or hunting animals for food. Both practices were seen as flouting the concept of private property and threatening precious wildlife and the natural environment. In William T. Hornaday’s 1913 book *Our Vanishing Wildlife*, the Director of the New York

³³ *Living the Revolution*, 87.

³⁴ “Dagoes Killing Fish By Using Dynamite at Rock Eddy and Harvard,” *Catskill Mountain News*, August 3, 1906.

³⁵ Environmental historian Adam Rome demonstrates that Progressive Era reformers worried about new immigrants’ interactions with nature, believing that “there was an American way of relating to nature, and that [immigrants] could not become true Americans until they made that way their own.” Adam Rome, “Nature Wars, Culture Wars: Immigration and Environmental Reform in the Progressive Era,” *Environmental History* 13 (July 2008): 433.

³⁶ *Living the Revolution*, 135.

Zoological Park devoted an entire chapter to “Slaughter of Song-Birds by Italians.” “Toward wild life the Italian laborer is a human mongoose,” Hornaday wrote. “Give him power to act, and he will quickly exterminate every wild thing that wears feathers or hair.”³⁷ To Hornaday and other critics, Italians’ disregard of property boundaries, disinterest in fish and game laws, and failure to follow accepted hunting practices (above all, their willingness to kill and eat songbirds), was cause for contempt, alarm, and a call for stronger legislation. For Italian immigrants, however, these practices were an essential means of survival.³⁸

The descriptions of and complaints about Italians in local newspapers were also representative of white, native-born Americans’ broad racialization and denigration of Italians in the early decades of the twentieth century. Although the *Catskill Mountain News* had largely stopped printing articles with absurd caricatures of Italians by the 1910s, anti-immigrant sentiment continued to run high and spiked in New York State and the nation as a whole after World War I. Immigration to the United States had largely ceased during World War I, but it picked up again at the war’s end. With these new immigrants came a resurgence of nativism and handwringing among native whites. Many were anxious about the seemingly inassimilable and dangerous foreign immigrants and their perceived impact the country’s economic woes and crime rates.³⁹

³⁷ William T. Hornaday, *Our Vanishing Wild Life: Its Extermination and Preservation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1913), 101.

³⁸ *Living the Revolution*, 135.

³⁹ John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*. (1955; 2nd ed., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 267-268.

The Ku Klux Klan experienced a revival throughout the United States in the 1920s, targeting not only African Americans but also Catholics and Jews.⁴⁰ Upstate New York was no exception.⁴¹ The Klan's activity peaked in the Catskill Mountains and Hudson Valley in the first half of the 1920s. Chapters sprouted throughout the northern Catskills in Greene and Delaware counties, as well as further south in Orange and Ulster counties. As greater numbers of racial and ethnic minorities moved from New York City (deemed "the most un-American city of the American continent" by the Klan's Imperial Wizard William Joseph Simmons) to the Catskills to live, work, and vacation, the Klan grew in popularity and visibility.⁴²

The Klan's anger toward Catholics was evident in the many small towns throughout the Catskills where Catholic immigrants settled to work on the railroads, in shale mines, and in other local industries.⁴³ In the town of Coxsackie, the Ku Klux Klan distributed a leaflet entitled "DO YOU KNOW?," warning white Protestants of the threats posed by the pope, Roman Catholicism, and Catholic immigrants in the

Higham describes the surge of nativism in the 1920s extensively in this chapter; see Chapter 10, "The Tribal Twenties," 264-299.

⁴⁰ *Strangers in the Land*, 286-299.

⁴¹ There was also significant urban membership in the Klan throughout New York State. One defector estimated that there were twenty-one klaverns in New York City in 1922; however, as a whole, the city was largely unwelcoming to the Klan. There were also chapters in cities including Buffalo, Rochester, Albany, Syracuse, and Binghamton, among others. Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 173-179.

⁴² Quoted in *The Ku Klux Klan in the City*, 175. Stefan Kanfer has described the growing popularity of the Ku Klux Klan in the Catskills in relation to the Jewish resorts; see *A Summer World*, 96.

⁴³ *Strangers in the Land*, 291; David J. Goldberg, "Unmasking the Ku Klux Klan: The Northern Movement against the KKK, 1920-1925," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 15, No. 4 (Summer 1996), 33-34.

United States.⁴⁴ The Klan was prevalent enough to garner press in *The Catskill Mountain News*, usually when a cross was burned on a hillside to announce their presence in an area. In Delaware County in 1923 and 1924, there were reports of cross burnings in the towns of Andes, Stamford, and Walton.⁴⁵ Although the Klan did not gain a large following in the area, its presence was strong enough to intimidate and threaten immigrant families, though it did not disperse them.⁴⁶

The spike in nativism in the early 1920s was accompanied by repression of immigrants at the federal level. Beginning in 1919, the United States Department of Justice initiated a wide-ranging crackdown on radicalism and working-class labor agitation, in which Italian immigrants played a central role.⁴⁷ The passage of the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act placed significant restrictions on immigration through a quota system based on national origins. These laws had a powerful effect on Italian immigrants in the United States by bringing immigration from Italy to a halt. Until the early 1920s, Italian immigrants had high rates of repatriation and were less likely to naturalize than any other

⁴⁴ Ku Klux Klan, "Do you Know?," Folder 2, "Ku Klux Klan, Bulletins, 1927-1928 n.d.," Ku Klux Klan Records, 1925-1927, MS SC18842, New York State Library Manuscripts and Special Collections, Albany, New York.

⁴⁵ "Ku Klux Fiery Cross at Andes," *Catskill Mountain News*, November 9, 1923; "K. K. K. at Stamford and Sidney Center," *Catskill Mountain News*, February 29, 1924; "County News," *Catskill Mountain News*, April 18, 1924.

⁴⁶ Some towns were more welcoming of the Klan than others. In 1928, a regional Klan bulletin boasted that in the village of Walden, in Orange County, "The Police, The Council and most of the Merchants are favorable to the Klan. To prove [sic] this the Klonverse [province convention] is being held in the Walden City Hall Auditorium and the supper is being served in their dining room." Ku Klux Klan, "Bulletin #2, Second Province, Realm of New York," Folder 2, "Ku Klux Klan, Bulletins, 1927-1928 n.d.," Ku Klux Klan Records, 1925-1928, MS SC18842, New York State Library Manuscripts and Special Collections, Albany, New York.

⁴⁷ *Living the Revolution*, 199-201.

immigrant group in the United States.⁴⁸ Once migration back and forth from Italy was no longer a possibility, Italian immigrants were more likely to settle permanently, become citizens, and invest in their lives and communities in the United States.

The harsh anti-immigrant climate of the 1920s indirectly contributed to the growing number of Italian families settling in the Catskill Mountains. By extension, it also fueled the growth of Italian boarding houses. As immigrants increasingly chose to make a permanent home in United States and no longer had to save money for return trips to Italy, they could use the extra money for a summer vacation in the Catskills.⁴⁹ But native-born whites' cruel anti-Italian sentiments dictated the need for distinct Italian recreational spaces in the mountains, where Italians could feel welcome and at ease vacationing alongside other immigrants and their families.

New York City's gritty, noisy, congested streets left many Italian immigrants nostalgic for their lives in Italy, and longing to reconnect with the natural environment that they had direct access to at home.⁵⁰ Leonard Covello emigrated to the United States from southern Italy as a child, became a public school teacher, and later became the principal of Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem. In his

⁴⁸ *Living the Revolution*, 101-102.

⁴⁹ This may also help to explain, in part, why Italians began vacationing in the Catskills much later than their Eastern European Jewish counterparts. Eastern European Jews had significantly lower rates of repatriation, and therefore greater incentive to begin establishing permanent communities and ethnic social structures in the United States.

⁵⁰ Robert Anthony Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 37; *Living the Revolution*, 115.

autobiography, Covello recounted his Italian-born stepmother's desire to move out of New York City and into the countryside:

'Ah, how long it has been since I have felt the earth with my fingers,' Mamma-Nonna sighed to me. . . . She had heard that not far from New York City it was possible to buy a little house and a piece of land for not very much money. . . . 'If we had such a tiny place, instead of paying rent here in the city and getting nothing in return, I could have a garden and raise all the vegetables we would need. I would have chickens for eggs and a goat for milk. Except for sugar, flour, coffee, we would have to buy practically nothing.'⁵¹

Mamma-Nonna's rationale perfectly sums up the impetus that drove many Italian immigrants to settle in rural areas outside New York City. Many were nostalgic for the fresh air, sunlight, and rural environment of their villages in Italy, and a home in the Catskill Mountains promised access to all of these things. The idea of purchasing a home or farm in the country also offered Italian immigrants an appealing alternative to life and labor in New York City. It offered an opportunity to be self-sufficient; with ample space to plant gardens and raise livestock, the rural landscape promised security from hunger and destitution that many experienced in New York City. Some of these immigrants realized that they could generate additional income and security for their families by operating a summer boarding house, and began to do so in the 1920s and 1930s.

Italians settled throughout the Catskill Mountain and Hudson Valley regions, but most Italian boarding houses were clustered in two areas. The first area was in the northern Catskill Mountains in Greene County, where Italians became the newest visitors in an area that had long been popular among vacationers from New

⁵¹ Leonard Covello, *The Heart is the Teacher* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1958), 167-168.

York City. The area around the towns of Hunter and Tannersville had seen two previous waves of visitors. In the nineteenth century, this area was a popular destination for wealthy white vacationers; at the turn of the twentieth century, the area grew increasingly popular among Jewish vacationers. When they began to prefer the Sullivan County Catskills, Italians and other white ethnics took their places. The second area Italian immigrants settled was further south in Orange and Ulster Counties, where they established boarding houses in towns just west of the Hudson River, including Plattekill, Marlboro, New Paltz, and Walden.⁵²

Sicilian immigrants George and Nellie Algozzine were among the earliest Italians to settle in the Catskill Mountains and open a boarding house. Their experience provides an illuminating example of how these early boarding houses developed. In 1919, the Algozzines left their home in West New York, New Jersey and moved with their children to the northern Catskill Mountains in Greene County. George had developed severe asthma, and he and his wife decided that the fresh air of the mountains would be ideal for his health. The family settled in the town of Cairo, New York, where George established a barbershop and Nellie worked at home as a dressmaker.⁵³

Although the Algozzines did not move to the Catskills with the intention of opening a boarding house, it was an attractive prospect. Cairo was one of many

⁵² See, for example, newspaper advertisements for the Delmonico Villa in Walden, La Gattuta's and Villa Lo Cascio in New Paltz, and Canzoneri Hotel in Marlboro in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 4, 1935.

⁵³ 1920 United States Federal Census, NARA microfilm publication T625, roll 1114, Greene County, New York, Cairo, Enumeration District 49, sheet 3B - 4A, household of George Algozzine, accessed online at Ancestry.com, April 25, 2011.

towns in the Catskills that attracted urban visitors in the summertime. The *New York Times* described the drive along Route 23 running through Cairo as “one of the most rugged and scenic routes” in the Northern Catskills.⁵⁴ The town was home to at least one other Italian boarding house, the Villa Genova, which was being advertised as early as 1922 in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*.⁵⁵ The Algozzines recognized the growing demand for Italian-owned boarding houses and the potential money to be made in the tourist trade. In 1925, they opened Mount Carmela Cottage, a small boarding house that catered primarily to other Italians. Mount Carmela Cottage’s first advertisements in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* emphasized the boarding house’s ideal location, modern comforts, and Italian and American cuisine.⁵⁶

According to George and Nellie’s son, George Algozzine Jr., Mount Carmela Cottage could accommodate twelve guests at a time, and quickly became a successful business.⁵⁷ It was profitable enough that the Algozzines were able to purchase property on Main Street, where they established the Villa Palermo. Opened in 1926, the Villa Palermo was a much larger boarding house, accommodating up to forty guests at once.⁵⁸ The Villa Palermo continued to grow in popularity through the interwar period, as more and more Italians with a bit of disposable income sought summer vacations in the mountains. The Villa Palermo’s

⁵⁴ “Motoring to the Catskills Increasing in Popularity,” *New York Times*, June 21, 1925.

⁵⁵ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 16, 1922.

⁵⁶ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, June 21, 1925.

⁵⁷ George Algozzine, Jr., interview by author, Leeds, NY, June 24, 2011.

⁵⁸ The first advertisements for the Villa Palermo appeared in *Il Progresso* in 1926. See *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 2, 1926.

rapid success coincided with, and reflected, the increasing popularity of the Catskills among Italian immigrants as a whole.

Historian David Stradling argues that Jewish resorts in the Catskills “grew largely because [they] could attract wealthy Jews even while providing for the poorest of tourists.”⁵⁹ The same can be said of Italian boarding houses; there were a range of accommodations available for people of diverse means. Advertisements in Cairo Chamber of Commerce travel brochures from the early 1940s offer a window into vacationers’ many options. In one brochure, weekly rates for hotels and boarding houses ranged from \$18 per adult for smaller boarding houses with basic facilities, to \$30 per adult for larger and more luxurious accommodations.⁶⁰ Rates generally included three meals a day and use of boarding house facilities; children were accommodated at a lower cost. Charlotte Cicio, the proprietor of The Savoy House in Cairo, charged \$20 per week for adults and \$10 per week for children.⁶¹ In 1943 male manufacturing production workers in New York City earned an average weekly salary of \$55.⁶² Therefore, the cost for a family of three—two adults and one child—to visit The Savoy House for a week in the summer was roughly equivalent to

⁵⁹ *Making Mountains*, 191.

⁶⁰ Cairo Chamber of Commerce, “Town of Cairo in the Catskills, Greene County: Comprising Acra, Cairo, Purling, Round Top, South Cairo,” ca. early 1940s, Cairo Vertical File, Vedder Research Library, Greene County Historical Society, Coxsackie, NY.

⁶¹ Cairo Chamber of Commerce, “Cairo in the Catskills: Comprising Cairo, Purling, Acra, Round Top, So. Cairo. Cairo,” ca. early 1940s, Vertical File, Vedder Research Library, Greene County Historical Society, Coxsackie, NY.

⁶² State of New York Department of Labor, Division of Research and Statistics, *Handbook of New York Labor Statistics, 1948*. New York, NY: State of New York Department of Labor, 1949.

the average weekly pay for a male manufacturing production worker in New York City. Families of modest means saved all year to afford a trip to the Catskills.

Some of these early boarding houses were no-frills establishments with echoes of tenement life. George Algozzine, Jr. recalled that in the Villa Palermo's early years, the boarding house did not have indoor plumbing—only an outhouse. When the Algozzines upgraded to indoor plumbing, there were still only two bathrooms for “*all* of the guests”—approximately thirty-five people—plus the family, which included six children and two adults. The guests “had to wait in line. ‘Well, let’s see now, what time are you getting up?’ . . . In the hallways we had a line of people waiting for somebody to get the heck out of the bathroom . . . it was that kind of deal, you know?”⁶³ In a resort that was cramped for space, rooms did double duty. At night, the dining room became a dance hall: “people would move the chairs out of the way, tables out of the way, and start dancing . . . where we were eating.”⁶⁴

Much like the immigrant entrepreneurs who operated boarding houses, grocery stores, and saloons in urban ethnic enclaves, Italian boarding house proprietors catered to the specific needs and preferences of their visitors.⁶⁵ They knew the foods to prepare, music to provide, and games to play to keep guests satisfied. They also knew that the family, neighborhood, and regional ties that were integral to Italian migration and settlement similarly shaped immigrants’ recreational habits. Particularly in the 1920s and 1930s, Italian regional identities

⁶³ Algozzine, Jr., interview.

⁶⁴ Algozzine, interview.

⁶⁵ See Chapter 3 of Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

influenced the character and clientele of boarding houses. Like George and Nellie Algozzine, many proprietors attempted to highlight their regional identities by naming their establishments after Italian cities and regions. In addition to the Villa Palermo, there was also Villa Genova in Cairo, the Abbruzzi Castle House in Thompsonville, and Pensione Napolitana in South Westerlo.⁶⁶ Proprietors built up steady client bases from previously established social and familial relationships in New York City, word-of-mouth recommendations, and advertisements in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*.

Nellie Algozzine ran the show at the Villa Palermo. Although advertisements for the boarding house listed George Algozzine Sr. as the proprietor, it was essentially her business. George Algozzine Jr. referred to it as “my mother’s boarding house,” emphasizing that she was “the head chief of the whole situation. She ran the show, she was the one, boy.”⁶⁷ Taking in boarders to supplement the family income was a common practice for immigrant women, and Nellie was an adept businesswoman.⁶⁸ George Algozzine Sr. continued to operate his barbershop alongside the boarding house. George Algozzine Jr. recalled that “most of the time

⁶⁶ For advertisements for Villa Genova, see *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 16, 1922. For the Abbruzzi Castle House, see *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 1, 1923. For Pensione Napolitana, see *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 2, 1926.

⁶⁷ The Algozzines’ example indicates that there may have been many more boarding houses in the Catskills that were run by women than advertisements would suggest. As in this case, women may have in fact run many of the resorts that were advertised as having male proprietors. Algozzine, interview.

⁶⁸ “Ties of Affection,” 123-125; Donna Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 80-82; *We Are What We Eat*, 80.

he was asleep . . . in the barber chair doing nothing, and he wouldn't even come over to the boarding house!"⁶⁹

While boarding house owners did not necessarily own farms, they usually planted extensive gardens and raised livestock to help feed their families and guests. George Algozzine Jr., recalled that all six children helped run the Villa Palermo, and much of their energy was devoted to tending their livestock and two gardens. "We all helped get the potatoes out of the garden, picked the string beans and picked the corn out of the gardens, feed the pigs, feed the chickens, get the eggs."⁷⁰ Gardening was an integral part of many Italian immigrants' lives; Italians planted gardens, vines, and fig trees in even the smallest of urban spaces.⁷¹ There was ample space for gardening in the country, and immigrants made the most of it.

Italian immigrants grew variants of the same crops that they had cultivated in Italy, and these were often different from those grown by their Anglo-American neighbors.⁷² My grandfather, Nicholas Napolitano, was born in 1919 to Italian immigrants. My mother, Loretta Miller, recalled that he always kept a garden on the property of his dairy farm in Pine Bush, and he planted a number of vegetables that stood out from those grown by his American-born neighbors. He grew fava beans, romaine lettuce, plum tomatoes, and a long, light green, smooth, "J"-shaped squash known as "zucchetta cucuzzi." She recalled that her father and his brothers and sisters would pass around the squash seeds so that they could continue growing the

⁶⁹ Algozzine, interview.

⁷⁰ Algozzine, interview.

⁷¹ *Living the Revolution*, 136.

⁷² Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 175.

plant, which was otherwise unavailable in the area.⁷³ These kinds of gardening practices contributed to the creation of distinctive Italian American landscapes in the Catskill Mountains. Suburban and rural areas outside of New York City permitted “a more expansive expression of horticultural memory than do the comparatively small lots of the boroughs of New York.”⁷⁴

Gardening served another vital need for Italian immigrants. Although it was hard work, George Algozzine, Jr. noted that the gardens, pigs, and chickens all amply supplied the table for his family and the Villa Palermo guests, ensuring that the family “didn’t have to depend on anybody else really.”⁷⁵ This ability to be self-sufficient was particularly appealing to Italians.⁷⁶ Most had migrated from Italy’s southern provinces where subsistence production and agricultural labor were integral to country life, and migrants brought these subsistence practices with them to the United States.⁷⁷ The Algozzines found an appealing alternative to city life and labor in the Catskills, mixing new entrepreneurial opportunities with old subsistence production practices. For a small investment of money, they could own their own piece of land, enjoy the fresh air of the country, live self-sufficiently, and

⁷³ Loretta Miller, phone conversation with author, February 11, 2014.

⁷⁴ Joseph J. Inguanti, “Landscapes of Order, Landscapes of Memory: Italian-American Residential Landscapes of the New York Metropolitan Region,” in Joseph Sciorra, ed., *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2011), 84.

⁷⁵ Algozzine, interview.

⁷⁶ Self-sufficiency was also an attraction for ethnic enclave businessmen more broadly—even when it required “exploitation within the family” by relying on the unpaid work of family members. See *We Are What We Eat*, 87.

⁷⁷ Elizabeth Ann Zanoni, “Gendering Nations of Consumers: Migration and Commerce Between Italy, the U.S., and Argentina, 1880 to 1940,” PhD Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2011.

still be within easy travelling distance to visit family and friends in the city. But as George Algozzine Jr.'s memories of the Villa Palermo suggest, owning and operating a boarding house was also a taxing, full-time job.

Italian boarding house proprietors' desire to exchange the city for the fresh air and natural environment of the mountains was largely the same impulse that drew vacationers to the Catskills. They capitalized on the various rural "products" and crops that had little to no financial value to rural inhabitants but held tremendous appeal to urban residents.⁷⁸ Early Villa Palermo advertisements highlighted the abundance that country life had to offer: "Excellent View of Mountains – Large Airy Rooms – Large Shady Lawn – Fresh Vegetables from our own farm."⁷⁹ For proprietors who ran both a farm and a boarding house on their property, the farm itself was a "product." Interviewee Val Fede recalled vacationing on a farm in Highland, New York as a child in the 1930s. One of his clearest memories of the experience was that the children were allowed to go for rides on the sheep. It was an extremely novel and exciting activity for a bunch of city kids.⁸⁰

Even Italians who did not run full-time boarding houses found opportunities to make some extra money from urban visitors. Farmers sometimes took in

⁷⁸ *Inventing New England*, 145.

⁷⁹ Cairo Chamber of Commerce, "Cairo in the Catskills: Comprising Cairo, Purling, Acra, Round Top, So. Cairo," undated (probably late 1930s or early 1940s), Vedder Research Library, Greene County Historical Society, Coxsackie, NY.

⁸⁰ Loretta and Val Fede, interview by author, Massapequa Park, NY, January 20, 2013.

boarders to supplement the family income.⁸¹ In the early 1940s my grandparents, Anna and Nicholas Napolitano, began renting out a spare a room in their house to Italians from New York City and Long Island who came to Pine Bush to hunt in the fall and winter seasons. Anna's brother, Victor Riccardi, still lived in New York City, and he helped spread the word that his sister owned land upstate where they could go hunting. The arrangement allowed my grandparents to make a little extra money each year to supplement the income generated by their dairy farm.⁸²

Mountain views, fresh air, shady lawns, fresh vegetables, and hunting grounds might be taken for granted by residents of the Catskills. To an urbanite, they were exciting lures, holding particular appeal for immigrants with memories of rural Italy. Richard Gambino, who vacationed in the Catskills with his family each summer in the 1940s and early 1950s, recalled that his Sicilian grandmother "loved being in, she called it 'the fresh air,' and just loved drinking cool water in the summer . . . That was not considered an indulgence, that was considered part of the [Italian] culture."⁸³ Many immigrants saw these things as necessities, not amenities.

For George and Nellie Algozzine, the boarding house business was an integral part of their livelihood and essential to sustaining their year-round life in Cairo. Other Italian boarding houses were strictly summer businesses. The owners lived and worked in the city from mid-September to early May, then moved to the Catskills during the summer months. For example, Joseph Sausto was an Italian

⁸¹ Stradling notes that Jewish farmers were "instrumental in the development of Borscht Belt tourism." The same could be same for other immigrant groups, including Italians. *Making Mountains*, 186.

⁸² Miller, phone conversation.

⁸³ Richard Gambino, phone interview by author, January 19, 2012.

immigrant who came to the United States in 1914. He worked as a tailor in New York City's garment district, and began taking vacations in the Catskills in the early 1920s during the garment industry's slow summer season. The seasonal nature of the industry, which employed many Italian and Jewish laborers, allowed workers to plan their vacations around these slow work periods in the summer.⁸⁴

Sausto ultimately decided that he would like to run his own resort. According to his grandson (also named Joseph Sausto), in 1925 "he rented a place up in Lexington for the summer . . . [and] started taking in boarders, and the second year he rented two places, and the third year he had three places." In *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, Joseph Sausto was listed as the proprietor of Hazelhurst Hotel in Hunter in 1925; the following summer, he was advertising the Villa Sausto in Hunter.⁸⁵ He ultimately decided that three boarding houses required too much work, and in 1927 he focused his energies solely on the Pleasant Rest House (later Pleasant Acres) in Leeds. Sausto did not initially intend for the Pleasant Rest House to be a year-round business. As his grandson later explained, the financial stability of the business was tenuous at best in the resort's early years: "He used to lose money in the summer business, but go make it in the winter [in the garment industry] . . . [when] it started out, it was pretty much a break-even proposition.

⁸⁴ *Adapting to Abundance*, 128.

⁸⁵ Advertisement for Hazelhurst Hotel in "Ritrovi Estivi" section of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 16, 1925. In 1926, when Sausto was advertising the Villa Sausto, the Hazelhurst Hotel was listed under the proprietorship of C. Mosca—presumably another Italian. 1926 advertisements for Villa Sausto and Hazelhurst Hotel in "Ritrovi Estivi," *Il Progresso-Italo-Americano*, July 1, 1926.

From what I understand it was a way for him to get away over the summer.”⁸⁶

Joseph Sausto and his wife, Jessie Sausto, continued to operate Pleasant Acres not because they made a lot of money from it, but because they enjoyed spending time in the country every summer. It was a labor of love.

When Joseph and Jessie Sausto opened the Pleasant Rest House in 1927, many of their first guests were Italian friends and acquaintances from the New York City garment industry. Joseph encouraged his coworkers and their friends to come to the Catskills during the summer months.⁸⁷ This turned out to be an effective means of establishing a loyal clientele. Many vacationers visited the same resorts every year with the same group of family and friends. When they enjoyed themselves, they often invited more people to join them.

The Saustos’ and Algozzines’ experiences of boarding house ownership were very different. Joseph Sausto was not making very much (if any) money on his boarding houses each summer, but his work as a tailor in New York City put him in a financial position to operate them anyway. By contrast, George and Nellie Algozzine opted to move to the Catskills and settle permanently. In so doing, they avoided factory labor or construction work in the city, and could live self-sufficiently on their property in Cairo. Yet on paper, they were in a more precarious financial position. They ran the Villa Palermo as a necessity, not as a means to “get away.” Nevertheless, by the mid-1930s, business was thriving at both the Villa Palermo and

⁸⁶ Joe Sausto, interview by Rachelle H. Saltzman, April 19, 1994, transcript, “The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills” exhibit, Folklore Archive, DCHA.

⁸⁷ Sausto, interview.

the Pleasant Rest House. Italians began visiting the Catskills in droves. Boarding houses and resorts served a vital need for Italian immigrants and their families, offering Italian-run recreational spaces free from the harassment of native-born whites, a respite from urban labor, and spaces to reconnect with the natural environment. The popularity of Italian resorts would only continue to grow after World War II.

Ethnicity and ethnic identity are fluid concepts, continually created and recreated in the face of changing local and national circumstances.⁸⁸ Summer boarding houses and resorts provided an ideal setting in which “the invention of ethnicity,” and the negotiation of multiple regional, national, and hyphenated-American identities could take place.⁸⁹ By the 1920s and 1930s, the impact of the Red Scare, virulent nativism, and restrictive immigration legislation provided the impetus for first- and second-generation Italian Americans to begin shedding their Italian regional identities and asserting and embracing instead a hyphenated ethnic-American identity, as well as a white racial identity.⁹⁰ This process was facilitated by the fact that, from the very start, Italians’ perceived racial inferiority did not negate their acceptance as white by the U.S. government, employers, unions, middle-class reformers, and many others: “If Italians were racially undesirable in the eyes of many Americans, they were white just the same.”⁹¹ This was an important

⁸⁸ Kathleen Neils Conzen, David A. Gerber, Ewa Morawksa, George E. Pozzetta, and Rudolph J. Vecoli, “The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, No. 1 (Fall 1992), 4-5.

⁸⁹ “The Invention of Ethnicity,” 14.

⁹⁰ *Living the Revolution*, 233.

⁹¹ *White on Arrival*, 6.

distinction that would become particularly salient during the 1940s and 1950s, as Italians gained increasing acceptance in American society.

In the early 1900s, local white residents of the Catskills believed that Italians were racially inferior and dangerously threatening to the scenic beauty, pristine nature, and precious wildlife of the Catskills. Ironically, as more and more Italians began vacationing in the mountains in the 1920s and 1930s, they became integral to the summer resort economy. By the postwar period, some Italians would start voicing their own fears of racial minorities in the Catskills.

“Stay in Your Own Backyard”: African American Boarding Houses

Jules Bledsoe made his musical debut in 1903 at age five, singing a rendition of “Stay in Your Own Backyard” before the New Hope Baptist Church’s African American congregation in Waco, Texas. The song’s lyrics, written in highly stereotyped dialect characteristic of the time, depict an African American mother consoling her child who is upset that he cannot play with the white children he sees outside:

*Now honey, yo’ stay in yo’ own back yard
Doan min’ what dem white chiles do;
What show yo’ suppose dey’s a gwine to gib
A black little coon like yo’?
So stay on dis side of de high boahd fence,
An honey, doan cry so hard,
Go out an’ aplay, jes’ as much as yo’ please,
But stay in yo’ own back yard.⁹²*

⁹² Lyn Udall, *Stay in Your Own Backyard* (New York: M. Witmark & Sons, 1899), New York Public Library Digital Collections, <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-efb0-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, (accessed January 3, 2014).

Bledsoe would go on to have a successful and versatile career as a concert performer, opera singer, composer, and actor.⁹³ He lived in New York City and Los Angeles, toured in Europe, worked in vaudeville and radio, and had featured roles in performances including *Aida*, *Emperor Jones*, and *Show Boat*.⁹⁴ Throughout his life, Bledsoe consistently pushed back against racial barriers erected by white Americans who sought to keep him in his “place,” or in his “own backyard.”

Julius (“Jules”) Lorenzo Cobb Bledsoe was born in 1897 in Waco, Texas to a locally prominent African American family. His parents, Henry and Jessie Cobb, Bledsoe divorced when he was still an infant, and he was raised in a household with his mother, maternal grandmother, and five of his aunts and uncles.⁹⁵ Music and education played a central role in his formative years. The women in his family instilled a love of music in him at an early age, teaching him to play the piano and to sing. Bledsoe also distinguished himself educationally, graduating valedictorian of his class at the Central Texas Academy, an African American school run by black

⁹³ Lynnette G. Geary, “Jules Bledsoe: The Original ‘Ol’ Man River’,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 17, No. 1/2 (1989), 27.

⁹⁴ Bledsoe’s career is described in great detail in Geary’s article, “Jules Bledsoe: The Original ‘Ol’ Man River’.” See also Kenneth Robert Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 102-103.

⁹⁵ Bledsoe’s maternal grandfather passed away when he was still an infant. According to the 1910 United States Federal Census, when Bledsoe was twelve years old, he was living in the household of his grandmother, Feriba Cobb, with his mother Jessie Cobb, three uncles (Esau, Jacob, and Oscar), and two aunts (Ruby and Naomi). Bledsoe remained close to his aunts and uncles throughout his life, and at different times, many of them helped Bledsoe with the day-to-day operations of his resort business. United States Federal Census of 1910, NARA microfilm publication T624, roll 1575, McLennan County, Texas, Waco, Ward 1, Enumeration District 79, sheet 6B, 812 North Sixth Street, household of Feriba Cobb, accessed online at Ancestry.com, January 5, 2014.

Baptists, in 1914. In 1918, he graduated *magna cum laude* from Bishop College, a historically black college in Marshall, Texas, where he studied liberal arts and music.⁹⁶

Rather than returning to Waco after his college graduation, Bledsoe decided to head east. He settled in New York City in December 1918. Although his exact reasons for leaving Waco are unknown, we do know what Bledsoe chose to leave behind. In the early 1900s, Waco had established itself as a city with more than thirty thousand people, an immensely prosperous cotton market, a variety of manufacturing industries, and a long history of violence, racially motivated and otherwise.⁹⁷ In 1916, while Bledsoe was in college, Waco was the site of a brutal lynching. Jesse Washington, a 17 year-old mentally disabled black man, was convicted of murdering a white woman and seized by a frenzied crowd who tortured, lynched, and burned his body in the Waco town square. The gruesome event made national headlines and fueled the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign.⁹⁸ New York City must have seemed a welcome contrast for an African American man seeking to escape Texas's violent racial regime and pursue a livelihood befitting his education and exceptional talent. Bledsoe, like many other African Americans from the South, became part of a vast movement of African Americans migrating to New York City. He left Waco and never looked back.

⁹⁶ Biographical details about Jules Bledsoe are from Geary's article, "Jules Bledsoe: The Original 'Ol' Man River'."

⁹⁷ Patricia Bernstein, *The First Waco Horror: The Lynching of Jesse Washington and the Rise of the NAACP* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2005), 12-16.

⁹⁸ See *The First Waco Horror*, Chapters 8 and 9.

When Jules Bledsoe arrived in New York City in 1918, the burly, fresh-faced twenty-one year old was ready and eager to pursue a new career. He began working as a freelance musician in Brooklyn and enrolled at Columbia University to study medicine. His love of music—and his considerable talent—ensured that his budding medical career would soon end. A small group of elite African Americans including Alain Locke, Charles Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, and Walter White worked diligently to nurture talented young African Americans in New York City and bolster their budding careers in the arts, literature, and music.⁹⁹ Bledsoe caught their attention. According to Johnson, “Whenever [Bledsoe] was good enough to sing or play the piano or dance the Charleston (he is an expert), friends and acquaintances were unanimous in declaring that he ought to go on stage.”¹⁰⁰ Never one to shy away from the spotlight, Bledsoe eagerly took their advice.¹⁰¹

The young baritone made his recital debut on April 20, 1924, at Aeolian Hall in New York City. The program showcased Bledsoe’s broad musical range and received an appreciative notice in the *New York Times*.¹⁰² In response to the encouraging reception, he left his medical studies altogether and delved into opera. His first performance was in 1926 with a role in *Deep River*, followed by a big break

⁹⁹ *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 120-121.

¹⁰⁰ James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), 208.

¹⁰¹ Walter White, in particular, took Bledsoe under his wing and eagerly promoted his musical talent. *White*, 102.

¹⁰² “Jules Bledsoe Sings,” *New York Times*, April 21, 1924.

in 1927 playing the role of Joe in Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Show Boat* at the Ziegfeld Theater.¹⁰³

As Bledsoe's popularity as a musician grew, so did his social status. By all accounts, he was a central figure in Harlem's social scene.¹⁰⁴ He made his home in Harlem's elite Sugar Hill neighborhood, in the prestigious apartments at 409 Edgecombe Avenue.¹⁰⁵ The apartment building was one of the most elite residences in Harlem, home to illustrious tenants including W.E.B. Du Bois, Walter White, Roy Wilkins, and Thurgood Marshall.¹⁰⁶ Bledsoe was a magnetic personality and lived large, frequenting parties with the likes of heiress A'Lelia Walker, Walter White, and Carl Van Vechten. He was also part of Harlem's thriving gay community. In the mid-1930s, he became involved in a long-term relationship with Adrian "Freddie" Huygens, described by the *New York Amsterdam News* as a "gentleman . . . from a Dutch family that goes way back, and [who] happens to be one of Europe's wealthiest bachelors."¹⁰⁷ Bledsoe's name regularly graced the society pages and gossip columns of black newspapers including the Baltimore *Afro-American*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, and *The Pittsburgh Courier*. In 1928, the *Afro-American* proclaimed Bledsoe to be "all the rage these days." The compliment was as much a

¹⁰³ Paul Robeson later made this role famous.

¹⁰⁴ Historian David Levering Lewis has described Bledsoe as "one of Harlem's great party-givers." *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, caption of Jules Bledsoe photograph in inset between pages 272 – 273.

¹⁰⁵ "S·O·C·I·E·T·Y," *The New York Amsterdam News*, April 30, 1930.

¹⁰⁶ Noreen Mallory, *Harlem in the Twentieth Century* (Charleston, South Carolina: The History Press, 2011), 34.

¹⁰⁷ "All Ears," *New York Amsterdam News*, March 16, 1940. Another *Amsterdam News* article about Bledsoe and Huygens casually noted, "By the way, there's a street in Paris named for Dr. Huygens' illustrious family." *New York Amsterdam News*, June 1, 1940.

nod to his musical success as it was to his social reputation: "No party is successful without the presence of the star of 'Show Boat.'"¹⁰⁸

Jules Bledsoe could not have known how much migrating from Texas to New York City would change his life. His musical talent garnered him national and international fame, as well as considerable financial success. His newfound wealth and social status afforded him a different kind of escape, one that was accessible to only the wealthiest African Americans. Bledsoe joined the growing number of elite African Americans making their way to summer homes and boarding houses in the Catskill Mountains each summer.

In 1929, Jules Bledsoe purchased a large estate in Roxbury, New York, for a reported \$50,000 [Figure 3].¹⁰⁹ Roxbury was located roughly forty miles west of Italian resorts in Cairo and Leeds, at the northwest corner of the Catskill Mountains. The town was known primarily for its dairy farms and, beginning in the 1870s, its popularity as a vacation destination.¹¹⁰ Bledsoe named the property Jessie's Manna Farms after his deceased mother, Jessie Cobb, and ran the property as both a rural retreat and a working dairy farm. In 1930, Bledsoe announced that Jessie's Manna Farms would be open to the public as a summer resort in an advertisement in the

¹⁰⁸ "New York Society," *Afro-American*, July 21, 1928.

¹⁰⁹ Newspaper accounts offered different accounts about the size of the property, ranging between 300 to 500 acres. See "Estate of Jules Bledsoe Becomes Summering Place," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 9, 1930; "Bledsoe's \$50,000 Estate In The Beauteous Catskill Mountains Haven Of Rest for Scores," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 13, 1935; "Noted Singer, Tiller of Soil," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 9, 1937.

¹¹⁰ Anthony Liberatore and Lynette Hinkley Liberatore, *Around Roxbury* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2013), 7.

New York Amsterdam News. The advertisement beckoned visitors with the many amenities the resort had to offer:

Elevation 2,000 ft. Mountain air and water, beautiful scenery and all city conveniences. Horseback riding, fishing, motoring, tennis croquet. Garage for motorists. Week-end parties catered to. Southern cooking, country eggs, butter, milk, etc. Reasonable rates.¹¹¹



Figure 3. Photograph of Jessie's Manna Farms in Roxbury, New York. Guest Samuel Hecht of Metuchen, New Jersey, took the photograph, dated August 14, 1935. Photo courtesy of The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

Some newspaper accounts claimed that Bledsoe bought Jessie's Manna Farms so that he could have a place to recover from a throat ailment. The *Chicago Defender* hinted that this seemed a bit far-fetched, noting that it was a "rather expensive [solution] for the layman, if you consider \$50,000 in these boondoggling times . . .

¹¹¹ Advertisement announcing the public opening of Jessie's Manna Farms, *New York Amsterdam News*, July 16, 1930.

merely for a throat cure.”¹¹² In a draft of an unpublished biography, Bledsoe’s aunt, Naomi Ruth Cobb, offered another explanation. Bledsoe believed that “farm and farm life would be manna for him when the life (glamour) of New York City, the noises of the subway and elevated cars, taxis, crowded streets, night clubs, concern over contracts, and other burdens became heavy.”¹¹³ The throat ailment may have helped prompt the purchase, but he was undoubtedly drawn by the opportunity to own a restful and scenic getaway, far from the hustle and bustle of city life. As Harlem’s summer social scene increasingly migrated to destinations outside the city, Bledsoe was eager to share, and show off, his property to other elite African Americans.

The idea of owning a country home or resort in the Catskill Mountains was appealing to African Americans seeking wholesome, moral, and insulated recreational spaces where they could socialize with other affluent African Americans. Recreational options of this sort were limited in urban areas. In New York, the city’s black population doubled in size between 1900 and 1920, as migrants from the South and the Caribbean flooded into the city.¹¹⁴ Black neighborhoods were congested and overcrowded, and residents suffered from poor sanitation facilities, inadequate recreational space, and limited opportunities to

¹¹² “Jules Bledsoe Buys Home In Country; It’s Tops, Too,” *Chicago Defender*, July 13, 1935.

¹¹³ “Jessie’s Manna, Chapter XI,” box 2G74, folder 25, “Biographical and Autobiographical Material: Biography by Naomi Ruth Cobb,” Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

¹¹⁴ Dolores Greenberg, “Reconstructing Race and Protest: Environmental Justice in New York City,” *Environmental History* 5, no. 2 (April 2000), 235.

connect with nature. This was particularly true of Harlem, during this time period home to the largest concentration of African Americans in the United States.¹¹⁵

Most African Americans, regardless of class, lived in neighborhoods that were lacking even the most basic public recreational facilities. Parks, pools, and sports fields were few and far between in New York City's black neighborhoods, and were often segregated in practice.¹¹⁶ In the 1920s and early 1930s, the Children's Aid Society lamented that Central Harlem was "almost barren" of recreational spaces and facilities.¹¹⁷ This only began to change after the Harlem riot of March 19, 1935; soon after, Robert Moses spearheaded the construction of a new public pool facility for African Americans at Colonial Park in Central Harlem.¹¹⁸ But that hardly addressed the pressing need for recreational space in New York City's black neighborhoods. The subpar environmental conditions in Harlem and other black neighborhoods in New York City affected all African Americans, regardless of class.

The lack of wholesome recreational spaces was of particular concern to middle-class African Americans. Historian Kevin K. Gaines argues, "many black elites sought status, moral authority, and recognition of their humanity by

¹¹⁵ Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14; Christopher Sellers, "Nature and Blackness in Suburban Passage," in *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 96.

¹¹⁶ Marta Gutman, "Race, Place, and Play: Robert Moses and the WPA Swimming Pools in New York City," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67, No. 4 (December 2008), 536.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in "Race, Place, and Play," 536.

¹¹⁸ A Commission appointed to investigate the riot pointed to the persistent discrimination African Americans in Harlem faced, as well as the lack of adequate recreational facilities for young African Americans. See "Race, Place, and Play," 542-546.

distinguishing themselves, as bourgeois agents of civilization, from the presumably undeveloped black majority.”¹¹⁹ Prominent African Americans sought to elevate themselves through “class differentiation” and racial uplift. Their concerns about the growing popularity of public, commercialized leisure spaces reflected their desire to shore up the respectability of poor urban African Americans. Social scientists and journalists had long painted them as having a “predisposition to crime, vice, and immorality,” characteristics they believed were intensified in the urban landscape.¹²⁰ Elite African Americans worried that if poor black people engaged in gambling, dancing, and drinking at saloons and cabarets, it would reinforce these perceptions. They sought to increase the number of black-owned leisure spaces where “they would police the moral conditions of their patrons and their neighborhood,” and in the process, demonstrate that African Americans “were moral, upright people who were worthy of equal civil, political, and social rights.”¹²¹

Elite African Americans’ efforts to create their own exclusive leisure spaces outside the city also reflected this class differentiation impulse. They championed summer estates and resorts as healthier and more moral alternatives to commercial amusements in the city, but these were inaccessible to most black New Yorkers.¹²² Only a small group of African Americans could actually afford access to these private recreational spaces beyond the city limits. Bledsoe’s purchase of the Roxbury estate was representative of this broader trend.

¹¹⁹ *Uplifting the Race*, 2.

¹²⁰ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 158.

¹²¹ “The Horns of the Dilemma,” 14.

¹²² *Working At Play*, 192.

Prosperous African Americans had been taking advantage of new opportunities for formalized recreation and travel since the late nineteenth century. In the northeast, they began vacationing in Saratoga Springs, New York as early as the 1870s and 1880s, and by the turn of the twentieth century they had established boardinghouses and hotels in other Northeast vacation destinations including Atlantic City, Cape May, Niagara Falls, Martha's Vineyard, and Newport, Rhode Island.¹²³ By the 1910s and 1920s, black New Yorkers were purchasing summer homes throughout upstate New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. In 1939, the *New York Amsterdam News* confirmed the popularity of the "country-home trend" among elite African Americans, surmising that people were "simply tired of taking chances on their frequent holiday and week-end trips. . . . the money that is wasted on unpleasant week-end jaunts can be applied toward the purchasing of a place that you can call your very own—and city folk like that idea."¹²⁴ Jessie's Manna Farms reflected these trends, serving as both a year-round country home for Bledsoe and a summer resort for other affluent African Americans.

African Americans in the North were free from the overt humiliation of Jim Crow laws, but they still experienced routine discrimination in their everyday lives. This was true for their leisure and recreational pursuits, too; black vacationers "took

¹²³ *Working at Play*, 213-216; Mark S. Foster, "In the Face of 'Jim Crow': Prosperous Blacks and Vacations, Travel and Outdoor Leisure, 1890-1945," *The Journal of Negro History* 84 (no. 2, Spring 1999), 136. For an in-depth look at African American communities in the resort towns of Newport, Rhode Island and Saratoga Springs, New York, see Myra B. Young Armstead, *"Lord, Please Don't Take Me in August": African Americans in Newport and Saratoga Springs, 1870-1930* (Urbana, Ill., 1999).

¹²⁴ "Many City Dwellers Turn Country-Home Enthusiasts," *New York Amsterdam News*, 15 July 1939.

a chance” every time they went on a vacation. They could be denied accommodations at white-owned hotels, refused access to “white” beaches or amusement parks, or receive poor service at restaurants and gas stations. They were excluded more broadly from most travel guides that were “written ostensibly for all Americans, but because of the segregated underpinnings of the nation, really only for white Americans.”¹²⁵ Affluent African Americans made the best of this reality by utilizing their own travel and communication networks to find summer leisure spots where they would feel welcome and could let their guard down. By purchasing summer homes and establishing and frequenting summer resorts, they created private leisure and recreational spaces where they could relax, socialize, and pursue outdoor recreational activities in scenic, safe environments insulated from both discrimination and racism.¹²⁶

Historically, African Americans have viewed land ownership as essential to their economic independence and self-reliance in a society that repeatedly denied their equal status.¹²⁷ In the early twentieth century, this belief was strikingly apparent in the flurry of real estate purchases by black New Yorkers. James Weldon Johnson, himself the owner of a summer cottage in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, noted that among his contemporaries,

¹²⁵ Gretchin Sullivan Sorin, “‘Keep Going:’ African Americans on the Road in the Era of Jim Crow,” (PhD diss., University at Albany, State University of New York, 2009), 133.

¹²⁶ “In the Face of ‘Jim Crow,’” 131.

¹²⁷ Mart A. Stewart, “Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism,” in *“To Love the Wind and the Rain”: African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 13-14.

Buying property became a contagious fever. It became part of the gospel preached in the churches. It seemed that generations of the experience of an extremely precarious foothold on the land of Manhattan Island flared up into a conscious determination never to let that condition return. So they turned the money from their new-found prosperity into property.¹²⁸

Johnson may have overstated the number of African Americans who could afford real estate purchases, but his broader point is important: those who bought property did so because they believed it would provide them with a sense of security and a foothold in American society. A *New York Amsterdam News* article about Jessie's Manna Farms noted that Bledsoe's "one consuming belief is that the only hope for the Negro is for him to get his hands on some of the capital of the land."¹²⁹ Purchasing a farm or estate in the Catskills provided a sense of ownership, privacy, self-sufficiency, and refuge in an otherwise hostile recreational landscape.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ *Black Manhattan*, 153-154. Johnson purchased his summer cottage in the Berkshires, known as "Five Acres," in 1926. Sondra Kathryn Wilson, ed., *The Selected Writings of James Weldon Johnson, Volume II: Social, Political, and Literary Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), x.

¹²⁹ "Noted Singer, Tiller of Soil," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 9, 1937.

¹³⁰ Kimberly K. Smith notes that African American environmental thought contrasts with progressive and modern environmentalism in its emphasis on private property: "In keeping with the progressive distrust of private ownership, environmentalists worry that strong protection for property rights can defeat government efforts to restrict destructive uses of private land. But contemporary environmentalists usually assume that the community in question already enjoys the capacity for independent action and decision-making—for free labor—as well as social and political equality and a sense of responsibility for the land. The black tradition highlights the importance of property and other civil rights to achieving this capacity for individual and collective stewardship." *African American Environmental Thought: Foundations* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 96.

The establishment of country homes and summer resorts also reflected the desire of affluent African Americans to spend time in scenic and healthy rural areas outside of the city. Whereas cities were, for good reason, associated with dirt, pollution, and disease, the rural landscape was associated with healthfulness and rejuvenation.¹³¹ Temporarily escaping to the Catskills was an ideal solution to the ills of urban life for those who could afford it. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Age*, one visitor to a summer estate gushed, “teachers, doctors, business people, and a bevy of young ladies . . . showed that this place of abandonment, of quietness, of natural mountain hillside, forest and skyline beauty, with the stimulating mountain atmosphere and the appetizing cuisine, had brought joy and put pep into their life.”¹³²

For those who had migrated from the South, the Catskills also likely prompted some nostalgia for the South’s rural landscapes, and the family and friends that many left behind. In her collection of oral histories of the African American Great Migration, Isabel Wilkerson described the experiences of a woman named Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, who moved to Chicago from rural Mississippi:

On days when there was no work to be had, Ida Mae was cooped up in the kitchenette apartment, far from home, in a big, loud city she didn’t yet know. She was used to wide-open spaces, trees everywhere, being able to see the sun set and rise in the sky stretched out over the field. She was used to killing a chicken if she needed one, not lining up at a butcher and paying for it in pieces with money she didn’t have. As much as she hated picking cotton, she missed her sisters-in-law and

¹³¹ Colin Fisher, “African Americans, Outdoor Recreation, and the 1919 Chicago Race Riot,” in *“To Love the Wind and the Rain”: African Americans and Environmental History*, ed. Dianne D. Glave and Mark Stoll (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 64.

¹³² “The Old Stone House,” *The New York Age*, September 11, 1926, 3.

the other families on the plantation and her mother and younger sister.¹³³

Despite the negative associations that they undoubtedly had with life in the rural South, close contact with natural environment still held an appeal for some vacationers.

There has been a small black population in the Hudson Valley since colonial times. At the turn of the twentieth century, census data indicates that African American laborers lived and worked in Greene County towns including Coxsackie and Catskill. The black population throughout the Hudson Valley continued to grow with the onset of the Great Migration, and African Americans settled in both rural and urban areas upstate.¹³⁴ Although there was a black presence in the Catskills, these were still predominantly white communities.

Jessie's Manna Farms was one of the earliest black boarding houses in the Catskills, but it was not the first—only the best documented.¹³⁵ Brief articles and

¹³³ *The Warmth Of Other Suns*, 285.

¹³⁴ See for example the large number of African American male laborers living in Coxsackie and Catskill according to the 1900 United States Federal Census; United States Federal Census of 1900, NARA microfilm publication T623, roll 1039, Coxsackie, Greene, New York, Enumeration District 0075, sheet 25; and United States Federal Census of 1900, NARA microfilm publication T623, roll 1038, Catskill, Greene, New York, Enumeration District 0070, sheet 4; both accessed online at Ancestry.com, April 10, 2014. See also Andrew A. Beveridge and Michael McMenemy, "Appendix: The Black Presence in the Hudson River Valley, 1790 to 2000: A Demographic Overview," in *Mighty Change, Tall Within: Black Identity in the Hudson Valley*, ed. Myra B. Young Armstead, 263-280 (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003).

¹³⁵ There is very little record of these earliest resorts. Bledsoe's extensive paper trail exists because he was a prominent musician, and his family decided to donate his papers to the Texas Collection archives at Baylor University in Waco,

advertisements in the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *New York Age* indicate that African Americans began establishing summer homes and boarding houses in the Hudson Valley and Catskill Mountains in the early decades of the twentieth century.¹³⁶ The English House in the town of Catskill, a boarding house run by Mrs. C. Mims, was taking visitors as early as 1910.¹³⁷ A few more African American boarding houses opened in the 1920s, including the Saugerties Farm in Saugerties, Mountain Side Farm in Otisville, Greenwood Forest Farms in Greenwood Lake, and Snowdale Farm in Brewster. Like most boarding houses in the 1920s and 1930s, these establishments advertised the pleasures of farm vacations. Mountain Side Farm was characteristic, promising visitors “Special dinner, plenty milk chickens and eggs. Garden vegetables, shade trees, spring water.”¹³⁸

Women ran most of these early boarding houses. Unfortunately, it is difficult to know much about them; beyond being listed as proprietresses in advertisements,

Texas. The preserved evidence of his resort business is a rarity, and even this record is largely incomplete.

¹³⁶ Black newspapers sometimes listed brief notes about visitors touring the Catskills or staying at summer homes and resorts, but rarely with extensive detail. For example, the following note appeared in the “News of Greater New York” section of the *New York Age* on September 7, 1916: “Miss Beatrice L. Lomax of the National Urban League spent her vacation in the Catskills. With Mr. and Mrs. George W. Couch, she visited Leeds, N. Y.” For examples of early boarding house advertisements, see “Summer Hotels and Resorts,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, June 24, 1925; “Hotels and Restaurants,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 16, 1925.

¹³⁷ “At the Summer Resorts,” *The New York Age*, July 28, 1910.

¹³⁸ Advertisement for Mountain Side Farm, Otisville, New York, in “Summer Hotels and Resorts,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 24, 1925. African American boarding houses and resorts continued to emphasize farm life into the 1930s. In 1931, the Old Noble House in Coxsackie, New York, advertised “Milk, eggs, chickens and vegetables from our own farm.” See the advertisement in “Vacation Resorts and Excursions,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 5, 1931.

their names rarely if ever appeared in the black press.¹³⁹ However in urban areas, black women (like black men) faced limited employment opportunities, and boarding was a common means for women to earn an income. It was an obvious and acceptable extension of their work within the home, where women were already cooking, cleaning, and caring for their families. Married black women were more likely to work than their white counterparts; their wages were needed to supplement their husbands' incomes and there was not as great a stigma within the black community towards married women working.¹⁴⁰ Operating a boarding house offered African American women an appealing alternative to wage labor in the city, allowing them to work on their own terms, without white supervision, *and* on their own property.¹⁴¹

African Americans frequently established boarding houses and summer estates in areas where other African American property owners had already settled. Bledsoe was not the first prominent African American to purchase property in Roxbury. He had a wealthy predecessor in John M. Royall, a Harlem real estate and insurance businessman, who purchased a 166-acre estate there in 1925.¹⁴² Royall's property included two houses and a large farm. One of these houses, the "Stone House" (or "Rock House") was reported to be the former schoolhouse where nature

¹³⁹ I have also been unable to locate any of these women in the United States Federal Census.

¹⁴⁰ *Or Does It Explode?*, 22-23.

¹⁴¹ Kate Dossett, "I Try to Live Somewhat in Keeping with my Reputation as a Wealthy Woman': A'Lelia Walker and the Madam C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company," *Journal of Women's History* 21, No. 2 (Summer 2009), 93.

¹⁴² Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance: Volume 2, K-Y* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 955.

writer John Burroughs and the children of the Gould family (including railroad magnate Jay Gould) were educated.¹⁴³ Royall never explicitly advertised the Stone House as a summer resort—it likely operated on an invitation-only basis. Despite the lack of advertising, the society pages of the *New York Age* and *New York Amsterdam News* frequently reported on visitors staying at the estate. Royall's elite group of guests came not only from New York City but also from Long Island; Washington, D.C.; Chicago, Illinois; Richmond, Virginia; and Jersey City, New Jersey, among other places.¹⁴⁴

Bledsoe undoubtedly knew of Royall's property when he decided to purchase his Roxbury estate. Both were prosperous African Americans living in Harlem, about one half-mile apart from each other on Edgecombe Avenue (the Royalls lived at 228 Edgecombe).¹⁴⁵ Even if Bledsoe never spent time at the Stone House or one of the other African American boarding houses in the area, he certainly knew people who did. Purchasing property alongside other prominent African Americans in the Catskills likely provided a sense of security and community in predominantly white towns like Roxbury. Bledsoe and Royall also made a status claim by purchasing

¹⁴³ The historical importance of the property was frequently noted in articles about Royall's Stone House. See "John M. Royall, Harlem Realtor, Buys Big Farm Atop Catskill Mountains," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 3, 1925.

¹⁴⁴ "John M. Royall, Harlem Realtor, Buys Big Farm Atop Catskill Mountains," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 3, 1925; "Roxbury, N.Y.," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 1, 1926; and "Stone House Guests Spend Pleasant Week," *New York Age*, August 27, 1927.

¹⁴⁵ United States Federal Census of 1930, roll 1578, Manhattan, New York, New York, Enumeration District 1053, sheet 3B, 409 Edgecombe Avenue, household of Jules Beldsoe, accessed online at Ancestry.com, September 14, 2012; United States Federal Census of 1930, roll 1576, Manhattan, New York, New York, Enumeration District 1002, sheet 20A, 228 Edgecombe Avenue, household of John M. Royall, accessed online at Ancestry.com, January 5, 2014.

homes in Roxbury, a town that prided itself on its famous white residents including John Burroughs and the Gould family: they too were prestigious and wealthy enough to spend their summers in the exclusive, scenic town.¹⁴⁶

Bledsoe was not wholly representative of African American boarding house owners during this time period. He was male, a celebrity, very wealthy, and dairy farming was a hobby—not an integral part of his income and livelihood. His resort was undoubtedly larger than most African American boarding houses at the time, with “22 large, airy, light guest chambers.” The resort advertised its amenities in style similar to other establishments, but on a grander scale: “Nestled 3000 feet in historic Catskill Mountains with the East branch of the Delaware River coursing its way a stone’s throw away, Jules Bledsoe’s estate enjoys a wide vista of panoramic beauty. . . . Garden fresh vegetables, milk-fed fowl, fresh water fish, delicious pastry . . .”¹⁴⁷

Nevertheless, Jessie’s Manna Farms had much in common with other African American boarding houses and summer estates. Most catered to very small, elite crowd of black professionals, and were not necessarily family-friendly. The activities were also mostly consistent from place to place. According to the 1930 advertisement announcing the estate’s public opening, guests could enjoy

¹⁴⁶ The same was true of the mansion built by Madame C. J. Walker in Irvington, New York: “By deciding to build her house in such prestigious surroundings, Madam Walker asserted her business and personal success and declared her right to live among powerful white entrepreneurs.” Tara Dudley, “Seeking the Ideal African-American Interior: The Walker Residences and Salon in New York,” *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 14, No. 1 (Fall-Winter 2006-2007), 95.

¹⁴⁷ Jessie’s Manna Farms brochure, box 2G74, folder 33, “Personal Records: Financial Affairs—Jessie’s Manna Farms—Publicity,” Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

“Horseback riding, fishing, motoring, tennis, [and] croquet,” as well as the resort’s delicious “southern cooking.”¹⁴⁸ Photographs of guests and family members at Jessie’s Manna Farms show visitors engaging in typical resort activities—playing croquet, lounging on the lawn, posing in various places on the resort property, and motoring around the Catskills [Figure 4]. An article about John Royall’s estate described a similarly broad range of activities, from berry and cherry picking, to fishing, hiking, archery, pool and billiards, tennis, chess, and checkers.¹⁴⁹ Resorts provided a space for African American professionals to partake in and enjoy outdoor activities that were wholly unavailable to them in their urban neighborhoods.



Figure 4. Photograph of Jules Bledsoe and guests motoring through the Catskill Mountains. Bledsoe (far right) often took guests on driving excursions around the Catskills. The Texas Collection, Baylor University.

¹⁴⁸ “Vacation Guide,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 16, 1930.

¹⁴⁹ See for example, “Roxbury, N.Y.,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, August 18, 1926; “Roxbury, N.Y.,” *The New York Amsterdam News*, September 1, 1926.

As resorts like Jessie's Manna Farms promised and delivered a high standard of luxury, they also harked back to images of a simpler way of life in the countryside without the taint of slavery. Bledsoe did not advertise his farm as centrally as some boarding houses, but it was still a draw for many of his guests. In a letter encouraging a close friend to visit his farm, Bledsoe teased,

If you are run down and tired, just come right on out here to me. . . . What you need is some honest to goodness hard work, work that will make your old Twatt twitter every night from fatigue and make you glad that you have a breath of life left in your body. . . . Now, laying all jokes aside, I think you need a change of scenery.¹⁵⁰

Bledsoe did not expect his guests to actually spend their vacation working on the farm, but his jokes contained what he believed to be a kernel of truth: that the fresh air and simplicity associated with farm life was good for overworked urban professionals like themselves.¹⁵¹ Both aspects of summer resorts—luxury and simplicity—appealed to Bledsoe's city guests.

On Labor Day weekend in 1930, A'Lelia Walker-Kennedy invited guests to spend Saturday and Sunday at Villa Lewaro, the lavish estate she inherited from her mother in Irvington-on-Hudson. Walker-Kennedy was the daughter of the African American beauty products magnate Madame C. J. Walker and a central figure in the elite Harlem social scene. The party was followed by a Monday morning drive

¹⁵⁰ Jules Bledsoe to Herman Clay, January 21, 1939, box 2G72, folder 4, Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

¹⁵¹ Gaines notes that elite African Americans like W. E. B. Du Bois placed particular emphasis on the negative influence of urban life on black migrants from the South: "These urban 'problems,' measured by family 'disorganization,' were understood as deviations from blacks' presumably natural state of rural life, which was assumed to be qualitatively better on the farm." *Uplifting the Race*, 176.

across the Hudson River and north into the Catskill Mountains to Jessie's Manna Farms, where Jules Bledsoe treated "five carloads" of visitors to a barbecue at his estate. The weekend was reported breathlessly in the black press as a smashing success, "one of the most noted social events of the season."¹⁵²

Harlem social life was meticulously recounted and eagerly consumed in New York City's black newspapers, from the *New York Age*, to the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *Inter-State Tattler*.¹⁵³ Judging from growing press coverage of vacationers in the Catskills in the 1920s and 1930s, the mountains were becoming a fashionable destination for elite African American New Yorkers. In the summertime, Harlem's social scene increasingly extended north to the mountains.

The fact that Jules Bledsoe's guest list overlapped with A'Lelia Walker's underscores the extent to which Jessie's Manna Farms was a luxurious retreat. Bledsoe advertised the resort as a "Mecca for the Smart and Elite," and black professionals were the resorts' primary guests.¹⁵⁴ An article in the *Pittsburgh Courier* about Jessie's Manna Farms noted that in 1934 the resort welcomed "over 200 over-worked school teachers, actors, physicians and lawyers."¹⁵⁵ In 1935, African American workers made an average of \$20 a week, and black professionals earned roughly \$24.50 a week. The same year, Bledsoe was charging a minimum of

¹⁵² Bessye J. Bearden, "New York Society," *Chicago Defender* (National edition), September 6, 1930; "Fetes Villa Guests With Week-End Party: A'Lelia Walker-Kennedy's Two-Day Treat Precedes Bledsoe's Barbecue at Jessie's Manna," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 3, 1930.

¹⁵³ *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, 211.

¹⁵⁴ "Hotels," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 19, 1939.

¹⁵⁵ "Bledsoe's \$50,000 Estate In The Beauteous Catskill Mountains Haven Of Rest For Scores," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 13, 1935.

\$14 a week for a stay at Jessie's Manna Farms, a rate that did not include the cost of traveling to the Catskills.¹⁵⁶ Getting there also required having a car to drive the four-hour, 148-mile trip "from the heart of Harlem to Jessie's Manna," or the cost of a Greyhound bus ride to Roxbury from the Capitol Bus terminal in New York City.¹⁵⁷

The formative years of many African American resorts in the Catskills coincided with the onset of the Great Depression. Jules Bledsoe opened Jessie's Manna Farms to the public in 1930, less than a year after the 1929 stock market crash. The Great Depression had a devastating effect on African Americans of all classes in New York City. African Americans had a higher unemployment rate than whites, and even the black middle class "found its numbers reduced by a wave of layoffs and business failures that . . . forced hundreds of white-collar workers into the ranks of the laboring classes and the unemployed."¹⁵⁸ As a consequence, Bledsoe's business was shaky throughout the early 1930s.¹⁵⁹ Although Bledsoe's resort was advertised as being open to the public, only a very small segment of the black public could afford a vacation in the mountains and the means to get there.

¹⁵⁶ *Or Does It Explode?*, 82 and 85; advertisement for Jessie's Manna Farms, *Afro-American*, July 27, 1935.

¹⁵⁷ Jessie's Manna Farms brochure, box 2G74, folder 33, "Personal Records: Financial Affairs—Jessie's Manna Farms—Publicity," Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection. Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

¹⁵⁸ *Or Does It Explode?*, 42.

¹⁵⁹ When Bledsoe's aunt Naomi Cobb was helping to oversee the property in August 1936, she wrote to Bledsoe and assured him that "we shall soon in a year or two have to turn guests down; because people are now beginning to have some money again and they want mountain vacations." Naomi Cobb ("Nace") to Jules Bledsoe, August 6, 1936, box 1, SCM 86-16, "Bledsoe, Jules – Correspondence, Business – 1934-1939," Bledsoe Papers, Schomburg Center.

Other early African American resorts catered to a similarly small, privileged segment of black society. One such resort was King's Lodge, in Otisville, New York, established by M. C. Owens in 1937.¹⁶⁰ King's Lodge would go on to become one of the longest-running and most popular African American resorts in the Catskills. Charles Godfrey, Owens' son-in-law, recalled that in the resort's early years his in-laws relied primarily on word-of-mouth recommendations and avoided advertising "in Harlem and in places like that" for fear of attracting the "wrong people."¹⁶¹ A 1939 King's Lodge advertisement in the *New York Age* made this exclusivity clear: the resort catered to a "select clientele, adults only."¹⁶²

Both Bledsoe and Owens emphasized the "decency" and exclusivity of their establishments, and were attentive to how they were perceived by the local, predominantly white, communities of the Catskills. Charles Godfrey noted that the Owens family, as one of the first to establish a black resort in the area, faced some initial hostility from the local population. Some of the resistance was overcome by

¹⁶⁰ In the words of Owens' daughter Dolly Godfrey, "we worked hard and dad wanted us to have a place of recreation." Owens had worked for 17 years as a chef on the Pennsylvania Railroad, and then began purchasing apartment buildings in the Bronx and Brooklyn. In an interview decades later, Owens' daughter Dolly and her husband Charles Godfrey described how the family advertised primarily through word-of-mouth recommendations in the resort's early years. Dolly Godfrey recalled that a summer home was a bit of a novelty to her father's friends and tenants in the city, and many were eager to visit: "they would come up on Saturday and it would get late and some would stay overnight"; seeing that there was a demand for summer vacations upstate, he "began to charge people." Charles and Dolly Godfrey, interview by grandson Keith Taylor, ca. 1998 – 1999. Interview tape in the personal collection of Keith Taylor.

¹⁶¹ Charles and Dolly Godfrey, interview by the DCHA, July 18, 1994, "The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills" exhibit, Folklore Archive, DCHA.

¹⁶² *New York Age*, September 2, 1939.

simple real estate economics.¹⁶³ When M. C. Owens found that the property next door was for sale, he was told that a potential buyer was having trouble securing a loan. "I'll give you cash for it," Owens said.¹⁶⁴ Money talks, and Owens was able to purchase the property. Yet despite his relative class position in the black community, he knew he would have to work much harder than white resort owners to prove his establishment's respectability to the locals. Owens' daughter Dolly Godfrey noted, "when the people sold [my] dad King's Lodge, all the neighbors criticized these people selling it to a black man. And he says, 'I'm gonna show them that a black man can do as much or more than the whites. And they'll never be sorry.' And that was one of his main drives." Here too, the respectability of their patrons played an important role. Local white residents didn't want to see "Harlem night life" transplanted northward, and neither did Owens. Dolly Godfrey said that Owens "was afraid that a lot of folks didn't know how to handle liquor," so he did not install a bar at the resort until 1942, when the decision was forced by competition from nearby resorts.¹⁶⁵

Bledsoe and Owens shared a class perspective that was common of the Northern black elite. Bledsoe was particularly vocal, arguing publicly that the color barrier could be overcome with relative ease if African Americans were willing to work for it. A *New York Amsterdam News* reporter noted that Bledsoe believed that "Race or color offers no handicaps . . . At least not to one has the will to overcome

¹⁶³ Godfrey noted that the neighbors "weren't too particular about a black person," when the family first moved in. Charles and Dolly Godfrey, interview by the DCHA.

¹⁶⁴ Charles and Dolly Godfrey, interview by Keith Taylor.

¹⁶⁵ Charles and Dolly Godfrey, interview by Keith Taylor.

them.”¹⁶⁶ M. C. Owens was more tactful, but his emphasis on building a black-owned resort with a “select clientele,” and his desire to prove to white Otisville residents that he was their equal (or even their superior) was a direct reflection of what historian Jennifer Fronc describes as the “northern, urban variant” of uplift ideology. It was characterized by an emphasis on “leadership, moral stewardship, and business success.”¹⁶⁷ Black businessmen were driven by the hope that by establishing wholesome, moral leisure spaces that showcased their guests’ respectability and middle-class status, they would in turn demonstrate their fitness for social and political equality.¹⁶⁸

This individual “uplift” strategy was a deeply flawed approach to establishing civil rights for black Americans. By emphasizing the distinctions between supposedly respectable, hardworking African Americans and poor, lower class African Americans, it widened the gulf between them. In the process, it drew upon and reinforced racial stereotypes that African Americans were trying so desperately to shake off.¹⁶⁹ Bledsoe’s denial of the color bar and endorsement of self-help as the key to success contradicted the economic and social realities of most African Americans’ lives. Some were bold enough to register their dissent. One critic wrote a letter to the *New York Amsterdam News* editor lambasting Bledsoe’s assertions: “There are lots of Negroes who are not finished artists and workmen, but there are

¹⁶⁶ *New York Amsterdam News*, September 11, 1929. Bledsoe echoed the words of James Weldon Johnson, who was once quoted as saying that “the status of the Negro in the United States is more a question of mental attitude toward the race than of actual conditions.” Quoted in *When Harlem Was In Vogue*, 148.

¹⁶⁷ “The Horns of the Dilemma,” 13.

¹⁶⁸ “The Horns of the Dilemma,” 11.

¹⁶⁹ *Uplifting the Race*, 3.

plenty who are competent in trades, in professions and as artists and 'color is a bar to their success.' . . . The success of a few individuals should not pull the wool over our eyes."¹⁷⁰

Jules Bledsoe never publicly discussed the depths of the racism he experienced. When given a public forum to speak on the subject, he downplayed the existence of a color barrier and asserted that African Americans "have fundamentally sound reasons to be thankful that we are Americans."¹⁷¹ Despite his proclamations to the contrary, Bledsoe's private correspondence indicates that he consistently ran up against discriminatory attitudes and practices in his personal and professional life. Nowhere was this more evident than in the discrimination and racially motivated harassment he experienced in the town of Roxbury.

In August 1935, Jules Bledsoe embarked on one of his many routine trips from New York City to his summer estate in Roxbury. His niece Irene Cobb, her baby, and Bledsoe's secretary, John Sampson, accompanied him. Halfway through the trip, Bledsoe's car caught fire near the town of Highland in Ulster County. Bledsoe and his traveling companions were still more than seventy miles away from their destination, and they decided to take a bus from Poughkeepsie to complete the trip. When they attempted to board the bus, however, the bus driver refused to let them on. Harry Gath, the white bus driver, asserted, "the Hudson Transit Corporation had no right . . . to carry an interstate passenger. The tickets read from

¹⁷⁰ *New York Amsterdam News*, September 25, 1929.

¹⁷¹ He apparently made these statements frequently enough for the *Chicago Defender* to title one such article "Jules Bledsoe Goes Philosophical Again." *Chicago Defender*, June 7, 1941.

Danbury, Conn., though stamped in Poughkeepsie.” Bledsoe was infuriated and “refused to be jim-crowed,” demanding to be allowed on the bus. Bledsoe claimed that Gath responded by assaulting him with “a piece of iron pipe.” Bledsoe sued the bus company for \$500 in damages for violating civil rights law, and pressed charges against the driver for assault. A Highland Justice of the Peace in Highland agreed that Bledsoe was mistreated, and fined Gath \$25 for the incident. A few months later, an Ulster County judge reversed the decision, determining “that Gath was justified in using all the force necessary to keep Bledsoe off the bus in order to carry out the rules about accepting tickets.”¹⁷²

The details of the incident remain murky, but the anecdote points to uncertainty and violence African Americans faced when travelling in the interwar period. Car ownership facilitated middle-class African Americans’ freedom to vacation and travel long distances, while also minimizing the possibility of unpleasant encounters with white Americans along the way. Equally important, car ownership gave them a sense of “physical and psychic safety” when they were on the road.¹⁷³ Indeed, until Bledsoe’s car caught fire unexpectedly it had literally provided safety and security on his regular trips to Roxbury. When his car broke down, so too did the protection and barriers it provided from white racism and violence. As evidenced by the bus driver’s readiness to attack Bledsoe, violence was

¹⁷² The details of the incident were recounted in multiple newspaper accounts; see the *New York Age*, August 17, 1935, *New York Amsterdam News*, August 24, 1935, and *Catskill Mountain News*, January 24, 1936.

¹⁷³ “‘Keep Going:’ African Americans on the Road in the Era of Jim Crow,” 21-23.

a very real threat to black travelers in rural New York. Mobility could lead to increased abuse at the hands of white supremacists seeking to keep African Americans “in their place.” Bledsoe’s experience was part of a broader pattern of discrimination against ethnic and racial minorities in the resort area.

Some towns in the Catskills had reputations for being particularly unwelcoming to racial, religious, and ethnic minorities. Roxbury was one of them. A 1925 article about Royall’s Stone House in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, an African American newspaper, noted that Roxbury residents “Organized to resist what the natives called a ‘Jewish Invasion,’ it is an unwritten law that a Jew cannot purchase property in Roxbury.” Royall was therefore surprised to learn that a Roxbury resident was willing to sell his property to an African American, and he pounced on it when it was offered at a fair price. “Thus,” the *Pittsburgh Courier* concluded, “a colored man has become a property owner in a community that has long been known as one of the most exclusive in the State of New York, and the neighbor of millionaires.”¹⁷⁴

Jules Bledsoe’s experiences in Roxbury were consistent with these rumors. Bledsoe experienced harassment almost immediately upon arriving in the town in 1929. It started with a grim, threatening welcome: the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross on his front lawn.¹⁷⁵ He soon discovered that wealth and property ownership did not ensure that he would feel welcome or secure in the community, and his first

¹⁷⁴ “John M. Royall, Harlem Realtor, Buys Big Farm Atop Catskill Mountains,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 3, 1925.

¹⁷⁵ “Noted Singer, Tiller of Soil,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 9, 1937.

decade in the town was riddled with lawsuits and disputes with many town residents.

Things took a turn for the worse when Bledsoe and Freddy Huygens moved to Los Angeles in March of 1940, leaving the property in the care of Bledsoe's uncle, Oscar "Lutt" Cobb.¹⁷⁶ In late October a fire broke out at Jessie's Manna Farms, destroying his garage and two cars. Although Cobb was home at the time, he was unaware of the fire raging outside; he was listening to the radio, and did not notice it until a fire truck arrived.¹⁷⁷ When Bledsoe learned of the fire, he immediately suspected arson. He wrote to the New York State Police and requested a further investigation, enclosing a \$20.00 check in an effort to secure an honest response. It was a desperate, and telling effort—the only way he thought he could get justice was by resorting to bribery. The effort failed. The state police responded with the assurance that "after a thorough investigation . . . it was concluded that this fire was of an accidental origin."¹⁷⁸ The source of the fire was never determined, but Bledsoe's suspicion of arson was not unreasonable.

More tragedy and conflict soon followed. Almost exactly a year later, Bledsoe's uncle, Oscar "Lutt" Cobb, died in a freak accident. Cobb, overseeing the farm in Bledsoe's absence, died after being scalded with hot water while cleaning a

¹⁷⁶ Bledsoe left to study with voice teacher Lazar Samoiloff, who assured Bledsoe that there was "an immense field for good singing in Hollywood." Quoted in "Jules Bledsoe: The Original 'Ol' Man River,'" 47.

¹⁷⁷ "Garage and Two Cars Burned," *The Roxbury Times*, November 2, 1940.

¹⁷⁸ Joseph P. McGarvey, State Police, to Jules Bledsoe, November 4, 1940 and Daniel E. Fox, Captain, Troop "C" of the New York State Police, November 13, 1940, in box 2G72, folder 6, "Correspondence: April – December, 1940," Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

barrel at the Delaware County Dairies Creamery. As with the garage incident, Bledsoe suspected foul play.¹⁷⁹ When an African American friend, Bennie Smith, agreed to move to Roxbury to take over Cobb's responsibilities, he too found himself thrust into the ongoing saga. Smith and Bledsoe became embroiled in a prolonged and vicious dispute focused on the reliability of a local white man, Arnold "Red" Conklin, who was helping run the farm in Bledsoe's absence. Smith defended Conklin, arguing that he was an honest, hardworking man who was integral to keeping the farm afloat. Bledsoe was unconvinced, believing that his long-term knowledge of the community trumped Smith's on-the-ground assessment: "In ten days' time you couldn't learn what I've learned up there in twelve years."¹⁸⁰

The surviving documentary record makes it nearly impossible to determine if Bledsoe's suspicions were warranted. Bledsoe was notoriously irresponsible with money, and he was trying half-heartedly to manage the farm from across the country. His personal papers are filled with notices of overdue bills, and frantic telegrams from Cobb, Smith, and Conklin requesting immediate money necessary to

¹⁷⁹ Bledsoe again attempted investigate from his home Los Angeles. He wrote to a lawyer in nearby Delhi, New York, demanding a thorough account of Cobb's death. In particular, he wanted to know why he had not been immediately notified about the seriousness of Cobb's injury. "Oscar Cobb," *The Roxbury Times*, November 8, 1941; Jules Bledsoe to F. Randall Hagerman, November 10, 1941, box 2G73, folder 16, "Correspondence: November-December, 1941," Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

¹⁸⁰ In a letter to his attorney, Bledsoe described Smith as "a man whom I know to be honest and a friend of long standing." But their friendship quickly unraveled through a flurry of letters between Hollywood and Roxbury. See Bledsoe to Hagerman, November 10, 1941; Bennie Smith to Bledsoe, December 15, 1941, box 2G73, folder 16, "Correspondence: November-December, 1941"; Bledsoe to Smith, November 21, 1941, box 2G73, folder 16, "Correspondence: November-December, 1941"; all located in the Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

keep the farm afloat. Bledsoe's remaining paper trail suggests that he was spending more money than he was earning in his effort to keep up bourgeois appearances.¹⁸¹ Conversely, some of Bledsoe's closest confidants—and at times, Bledsoe himself—speculated that his own family members were taking advantage of him.¹⁸² By the time Bennie Smith showed up at Jessie's Manna Farms, Bledsoe was likely being betrayed at multiple levels, and had little faith or trust in *anyone* he put in charge.¹⁸³

Setting aside the question of who was "right," the dispute between Smith and Bledsoe illuminates Bledsoe's intense mistrust of white Roxbury residents, developed during his brief tenure as a landowner in the town. An unsigned and undated letter from Bledsoe's aunt, Naomi Ruth Cobb, to Bennie Smith elaborated

¹⁸¹ Bledsoe had neglected payments for his farm as early as 1932, and his lawyer sent a letter to him in London chiding him for missing mortgage payments and property tax bills. David Greenstein to Jules Bledsoe, February 26, 1932, box 2G72, folder 2, "Correspondence: 1931-1934," Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

¹⁸² Bledsoe blamed his uncle, Esau Cobb, for the missed 1932 mortgage and tax payments. Esau Cobb was managing the farm while Bledsoe was away, and Bledsoe complained that he "doesn't notify me of conditions until it is too late . . . I don't think I deserve to be treated like that." In 1937, Edmund Manchester, Bledsoe's friend from New York City, wrote to warn him that Oscar Cobb was neglecting his duties overseeing the farm: "the male members of your family haven't ever given the right sort of help nor co-operation, in the sane judicious and thorough manner in which the farm deserves and warrants." Bledsoe to M.O. Spiller ("Sis"), March 26, 1932, box 2G72, folder 2, "Correspondence: 1931-1934," Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection; Edmund Manchester to Bledsoe, April 7, 1937, box 1, SCM 86-16, "Correspondence, Personal - 1934-1939," Jules Bledsoe Papers, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY (hereafter cited as Bledsoe Papers, Schomburg Center).

¹⁸³ I am not convinced that Smith was cheating Bledsoe; he went out of his way to document every expense for him and sent incredibly thorough letters detailing the status of the farm – at one point even documenting and writing up a full inventory of the contents of *the entire property* (no small feat) at Bledsoe's request. But it is impossible to say for sure.

on the extent to which Bledsoe faced malicious actions intended to ruin his property and therefore, his business. Cobb explained:

[The] local whites . . . were after making it impossible for Jules to carry on with the farm so that they could get it back cheap after Jules had spent thousands improving the place. They have even gone so far as to burn Ku Klux Klan crosses in the front yard, and of course you know that they burned down the garage meaning to destroy the whole place after having cancelled all the fire insurance. . . . Any farmer local dealer who needed a little money in a hurry always came to Jessie's Manna for easy pickings.¹⁸⁴

As she made vividly clear, Bledsoe faced extreme difficulties in not only running, but also protecting his resort (and his investment) in this openly hostile environment.

Despite finding that he and his business were not welcome in the predominantly white towns of the Catskills, Bledsoe publicly maintained otherwise. He repeatedly proclaimed that hard work, perseverance, and talent were great equalizers in American society. In a 1937 article in the *New York Amsterdam News*, Bledsoe said he took it in stride when the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in his front yard in 1929: "What did I do? Nothing. I just went about my daily tasks and paid no attention to it." He claimed that almost a decade later, local whites had warmed considerably to his presence: "The singer is besieged with invitations to dine here and there, and to 'drop in after dinner for cocktails.'" ¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ This letter provides the most explicit explanation of the problems that Bledsoe faced, although various references to these events are articulated throughout the Bledsoe's correspondence. See Naomi Ruth Cobb to Bennie Smith, unsigned and undated letter, box 2G73, folder 23, "Correspondence: Undated and Fragments," Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

¹⁸⁵ This is not wholly untrue – he had at least one female friend in Roxbury, Mildred Caswell, who he corresponded with regularly, and there were probably others. But it was likely stretching the truth to say he was "besieged with

The events of 1940-1942 may have further soured Bledsoe's attitude, but he continued to keep the darker side of his relationship with the Roxbury community to himself. Privately, Bledsoe felt beleaguered by the hostile environment. His status within the African American community made it difficult to publicly express his anger at the persistent racial harassment and violence he experienced. The black press regularly championed Bledsoe as a success story, and Bledsoe himself was a master of self-promotion. For African Americans of his stature, articulating feelings of frustration and hopelessness were out of the question; "failures of any sort cast suspicion, not just on themselves as individuals, but on the moral worth of all black people."¹⁸⁶ He chose instead to keep these feelings to himself. Only in a moment of intense anger and frustration did Bledsoe share a more complicated version of his life in Roxbury—and even then, only in private correspondence with Bennie Smith. In a letter to Smith in October 1942, Bledsoe bluntly summed up his tenure in Roxbury. It was, in short, "one long story of persecution."¹⁸⁷ Yet he still did not leave Roxbury for good: that would be an admission of failure.

Jessie's Manna Farms began coming apart at the seams in the early 1940s, at the same moment that other black boarding houses and resorts in the Catskills were growing in popularity. By contrast, M. C. Owens' King's Lodge continued to draw

invitations." "Noted Singer, Tiller of Soil," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 9, 1937.

¹⁸⁶ *Uplifting the Race*, 213.

¹⁸⁷ This was common among elite African Americans. Gaines writes, "Only in private writings do we find frank expressions of anxiety, despair, and resentment among elite African Americans." *Uplifting the Race*, 213. Jules Bledsoe to Bennie Smith, October 19, 1942, box 2G73, folder 21, "Correspondence: October – December, 1942," Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

more and more vacationers each summer, and soon became one of the area's most popular African American resorts. Beginning in the mid-1930s, African American vacationers could consult a travel guide, the *Negro Travelers' Green Book*, which directed vacationers to black-owned businesses catering to black travelers.¹⁸⁸ Even as vacationing continued to grow in popularity among affluent African Americans, their destinations were still restricted by racial bias and discriminatory practices. But they also had a growing number of tools like the *Green Book* to help them navigate unpleasant travel experiences—or ideally, avoid them altogether. African American resorts expanded dramatically in number, size, and popularity in the 1940s, thanks to growing interest, incomes, and an expansive black travel network.

Jules Bledsoe did not live to see the dramatic growth of the African American resort industry after World War II. He died an untimely death from a cerebral hemorrhage in 1943. His obituary in the local *Catskill Mountain News* observed, "The singer's success with farming was something less than sensational but it afforded him a quiet place for resting during the summer after a strenuous season in the theater."¹⁸⁹ The obituary might have also noted that the resort afforded many other African Americans a quiet place to rest and get away from their stress-filled lives in the city, too. As one of the earliest African American resorts in the Catskills, Jessie's Manna Farms played a central role in establishing the mountains as a

¹⁸⁸ For Victor H. Green, the publisher of the *Green Book*, "the idea crystallized when, not only himself but several friends and acquaintances complained of the difficulties encountered; oftentimes painful embarrassments suffered which ruined a vacation or business trip." "The Negro Travelers' Green Book" (New York: Victor H. Green & Co., 1956), 5. Sorin provides an in-depth discussion of black travel guides like *The Negro Travelers' Green Book* and *Travelguide*; "Keep Going," 168-241.

¹⁸⁹ "Jules Bledsoe Dies," *Catskill Mountain News*, July 23, 1943.

popular vacation destination for generations of African American vacationers. In this sense, at least, Jessie's Manna Farms *was* sensational.

Conclusion

George and Nellie Algozzine's experience of resort ownership was in many ways dramatically different from Jules Bledsoe's. The Algozzines' boarding house was not a summer home – it was their primary residence, and renting rooms was integral to their livelihood. Together, their boarding house and barbershop supplied the family's income. Although it was hard work and required the effort of the entire family, it was preferable to the life they had left behind in New Jersey. For Bledsoe, Jessie's Manna Farms and his dairy farm were a hobby, products of his financial success as a musician and actor. It was certainly not a full-time job for him, despite requiring full-time effort. He was unprepared for the immense amount of attention and responsibility it required. Bledsoe later regretted purchasing the farm, lamenting to a friend, "No travelling Artist should ever have such property."¹⁹⁰

There were other differences too: the class status of each resorts' clientele was different. Resort vacations were entirely out of reach for the majority of both African Americans and Italian Americans in the 1920s and 1930s. During this time period, African American boarding houses drew vacationers who were primarily from the black middle class—a small, elite group of professionals who had the means to vacation in the Catskills. Italian resorts, in contrast, drew a more mixed group of working- and middle-class vacationers. Italian workers generally had more

¹⁹⁰ Jules Bledsoe to George Nixon, November 28, 1942, box 2G73, folder 21, "Correspondence: October – December, 1942," Bledsoe Papers, Texas Collection.

secure employment than members of the black working class, and were more often in a position to save money for a summer vacation. And whereas Italian vacationers often went to the Catskills with their families, African American resorts often excluded children, limiting the clientele to adult professionals.

Despite their differences, these histories should not be considered in isolation of one another. Both histories reflect the shared frustrations that accompanied the migration experience, and demonstrate how upwardly mobile immigrants and African Americans worked to remedy or ease their experiences of dislocation. European immigrants and African American migrants moved to New York City with hopes of escaping oppressive living and working conditions and building better lives for themselves. While many undoubtedly succeeded in this effort, they still encountered disappointments and made trade-offs in the process. Both groups experienced persistent marginalization at the hands of native-born white Americans in the North. The experiences of nativism and discrimination pushed many immigrants and nonwhites to socialize and do business within the safe confines of their own communities. They placed special emphasis on the importance of property ownership, self-sufficiency, and the need to control their own land and labor.

Many African Americans and Italians had also migrated from rural, or semi-rural areas where they had access to the natural environment. When they arrived in New York City, they experienced common frustrations with the congested, polluted city, as well as the dearth of green spaces and recreational facilities that were essential to their health and happiness. Those who could afford it placed a high

value on getting out of the city. When they arrived in the mountains, they were enamored with the sense of freedom and healthfulness that they found there.

African American and Italian resorts were born of similar needs that reflected each group's economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged status, and their hopes for greater acceptance in American society in the future. Their histories would begin to diverge in the 1930s and 1940s, reflecting the changing racial dynamics within New York City and American society as a whole. The distinctions were evident early on in the Catskills. Although African Americans and Italians both experienced discrimination when they began settling in the mountains, white locals were particularly violent and aggressive toward African Americans. Jules Bledsoe was much more affluent than the Algozzines or Saustos, but his money could not buy him acceptance. He was still black, and that made his entry into predominantly white Roxbury that much more fraught. Italian immigrants began to absorb these lessons almost immediately upon arriving in the United States. They quickly learned the black/white racial binary that divided the nation, which side they were on, and which side they would benefit from. Their acceptance hinged on dominant white society excluding people of color and identifying Italians as racially inferior, yet still white.¹⁹¹

By the 1930s and 1940s, Italian immigrants and their children self-identified as white ethnics. Despite their own history of racial stigmatization, Italians further distanced themselves from their black neighbors in an effort to secure better jobs, housing, and control over urban space and resources. African Americans, in

¹⁹¹ *Living the Revolution*, 102 and 107.

contrast, remained second-class citizens. As we will see in the following chapters, the social and economic divisions between African Americans and white ethnics grew dramatically after World War II. This coincided with the surging popularity of summer resorts in the Catskills, and further contributed to the development of a segregated resort landscape that would persist throughout most of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 2

FINDING HOME IN THE CATSKILLS: THE POSTWAR GROWTH OF RESORTS, 1945 - 1965

Hundreds of resort advertisements jockeyed for vacationers' attention in the *Brooklyn Eagle's* 1946 Summer Resort and Travel Directory. Perrella's: "THE IDEAL MOUNTAIN RESORT': SWIM BY DAY—DANCE BY NIGHT." The Dellwood: "THIS YEAR SMART VACATIONISTS ARE GOING TO THE DELLWOOD." Acra Manor: "NEW CONCRETE SWIMMING POOL . . . MUSIC, DANCING, BAR ON PREMISES."¹ The days of quiet, restful vacations in the Catskills' sleepy rural towns were over. In the years following World War II, vacationers demanded more than farm-fresh meals, a rocking chair on the porch, a nearby lake for swimming, and evening parlor card games. They expected in-ground pools, fashion shows and beauty contests, tennis courts and baseball fields, structured group activities, and glitzy nightclubs with top-notch entertainment. Thousands of vacationers from the New York metropolitan area hopped in their cars and buses and headed north to the mountains, in pursuit of the freedom and social cachet of a Catskills getaway. It was boom time in the Catskills.

Americans of many races and ethnicities were eager to hit the road when World War II came to an end in 1945. The New York State Chamber of Commerce, recognizing that pent-up consumer demand fueled appetites for summer vacations, deemed 1946 "Victory Vacation Year":

¹ Summer Resort and Travel Directory Section, 1946," Supplement to *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 9, 1946.

The strains and stresses of war are over, and families are once more united and anxious to go on a long deferred holiday in places offering peaceful pleasures, delightful surroundings and freedom from worry.

The Empire State is ready to satisfy this pent-up demand. Every share of desire can be met.²

The “Victory Vacation” idea reflected state and national efforts encouraging American citizens to reward themselves for their wartime thrift and personal sacrifices—and in the process spend and consume to advance the nation’s economic recovery.³ It echoed tourism trends begun in the second half of the nineteenth century, when vacationing and nationalism became closely intertwined. Well into the first half of the twentieth century, tourism bolstered the American economy while also helping give shape to a broad national identity and consumer culture.⁴ According to historian Marguerite Shaffer, “Between 1880 and 1940 the emerging tourist industry in the United States actively promoted tourism as a ritual of American citizenship,” and vacationers were encouraged to seek out “sights and scenes that embodied the essence of America.”⁵ The Catskill Mountains had been an integral part of this ritual since the nineteenth century, when it was a must-see destination on the American Grand Tour.⁶ Post-World War II “Victory Vacations” reflected a revival and revamping of these earlier efforts. Blending patriotism and

² *Summer in New York State*, travel booklet (Albany, NY: New York State Department of Commerce, 1946). Author’s collection.

³ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 119.

⁴ Marguerite S. Shaffer, *See America First: Tourism and National Identity* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 4.

⁵ *See America First*, 4-6.

⁶ See Chapter 3, “Panoramas of American Civilization” of *Sacred Places*, and Chapter 2, “Envisioning Mountains” of *Making Mountains*.

tourism, Victory Vacations offered a modern solution to the economic needs of the postwar nation.

Racial and ethnic minorities embraced vacationing alongside their white, native-born counterparts, boosted by paid vacation time gained through unionization and postwar industrial jobs. The popularity of African American, Italian, and a growing number of Puerto Rican resorts after World War II reflected broader trends in American family vacations and consumer culture. Vacationers' identities as American consumers were reinforced at summer resorts.⁷ But the patriotic rhetoric driving the "Victory Vacation" campaign likely rang hollow for many ethnic and racial minorities. For these groups, vacationing in the Catskills was not solely (or even primarily) a rite of American citizenship; proclamations of American exceptionalism and tolerance of racial and ethnic diversity conflicted directly with their lived experiences.

The nativism and anti-immigrant hysteria of the 1920s was still fresh in the memories of Italian immigrants and their children, and ethnicity remained salient in their everyday lives. In the postwar period, many Italians continued to live, socialize, and work within their ethnic communities, even as they increasingly identified as white and gained greater acceptance in American society. For African Americans and Puerto Ricans, World War II brought American racial inequality into the global spotlight, highlighting the contradictions of the United States fighting racism abroad while perpetuating it at home. Racial minorities continued to

⁷ Susan Sessions Rugh has described the postwar decades as "the golden age of American family vacations." *Are We There Yet?*, 2.

encounter discrimination in employment, unions, and housing, and places of public accommodation—the same resorts, restaurants, public pools, and amusements parks open to their white counterparts.⁸ Museums and other tourist destinations celebrating American heritage offered a whitewashed, celebratory vision of American history and culture, and did not reflect the many different backgrounds, experiences, and identities of minority and immigrant populations in the United States. Many ethnic and racial minorities rightly believed that they would still be unwelcome—or at best, barely tolerated—at summer resorts owned and patronized by white, native-born Americans.

In the postwar decades the Catskills resort area had become a destination for ethnic and racial minorities to foster a sense of group identity, distinct from Anglo-American society and culture. For Italian Americans, resort vacations signaled both their Americanization and entrance into the white American middle class, and their desire to privately negotiate and create an Italian American identity that was compatible with that status. For middle class African Americans, the ability to afford a resort vacation was a point of pride and “an implicit assertion of equality.”⁹ Vacationing allowed them to engage in the consumer behavior that was central to

⁸ The racial boundaries of the resort landscape and efforts to desegregate the resort area are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. Historians Martha Biondi, Thomas J. Sugrue, and Victoria W. Wolcott have illuminated civil rights activists’ efforts to desegregate public accommodations in postwar New York and other Northern states. See Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); and Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters: The Struggle over Segregated Recreation in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

⁹ Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2004), 9.

being an American, despite their treatment as second-class citizens. For Puerto Ricans, resorts provided a sense of Puerto Rican community and pride in a society that routinely denied their citizenship and emphasized their foreignness. To varying degrees, all three groups experienced the disruptive effects of migration and discrimination by white society. Summer resorts offered a welcoming haven from these problems and worries.

The increased popularity of African American, Italian, and Puerto Rican resorts coincided with the onset of tremendous upheavals in the New York metropolitan area. In the postwar years, there were glimmers of the changes to come. White ethnics saw suburbanization as a sign of success and upward mobility, and many moved from inner city neighborhoods to suburban areas in Queens, Staten Island, Long Island, and northern New Jersey.¹⁰ In all, more than two million white New Yorkers left the city between 1940 and 1970.¹¹ At the same time that white ethnics were moving out of the city, large numbers of African Americans and Puerto Ricans were moving in. New York City's black population grew by 62 percent in the 1940s, as a result of another, much larger, wave of African American migration from the South.¹² Puerto Rican migrants were drawn to the mainland in the postwar decades by the prospect of manufacturing work in New York City and dwindling job opportunities in Puerto Rico. As American citizens, their migration

¹⁰ Joshua B. Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000), 170-171.

¹¹ *Working-Class New York*, 172.

¹² Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 3.

was unimpeded by restrictive immigration laws.¹³ The postwar influx of African Americans and Puerto Ricans prompted white ethnics' anxieties and fears about the changing racial and ethnic makeup of their neighborhoods, and further fueled their movement to the suburbs.¹⁴

Neighborhoods where white ethnic New Yorkers were moving out and racial minorities were moving in were wracked with tension. Many white ethnics who remained in the city resented racial minorities moving into in "their" communities, despite the fact that many of their family, friends, and neighbors had left those neighborhoods of their own volition.¹⁵ At the same time, nonwhite residents faced persistent housing discrimination that restricted them to neighborhoods with large nonwhite populations, or neighborhoods where white ethnics were moving out. Even if they could afford to buy or rent in more affluent areas, discrimination prevented it.¹⁶ Urban renewal, public housing projects, and other public works projects further fueled racial animosity and segregation.¹⁷ East Harlem offers a telling example: historian Robert Orsi notes that "between 1945 and 1963, eleven public housing projects were built . . . displacing the local (Italian) population with

¹³ Ramón Grosfoguel, *Colonial Subjects: Puerto Ricans in a Global Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 140; *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*, 38.

¹⁴ Eric C. Schneider, *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings: Youth Gangs in Postwar New York* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 27-28.

¹⁵ *Working-Class New York*, 170-171; "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People," 317.

¹⁶ *Working-Class New York*, 183-185.

¹⁷ Robert Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920-1990," *American Quarterly* 44, No. 3 (September 1992), 326; *Living the Revolution*, 239.

more than 12,000 low-income black and Hispanic families.”¹⁸ These changes coincided with New York City’s shift from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy. The resulting loss of factory jobs hit African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and working-class white ethnics particularly hard.¹⁹ The full impact of these changes would not be felt until the 1960s and 1970s, but these groups increasingly found themselves competing for limited resources, jobs, and social and recreational space.

It is no coincidence that Italian, African American, and Puerto Rican resorts surged in popularity at the same time that these urban neighborhoods were undergoing profound demographic and economic shifts. As the political, economic, and social landscape changed in New York City, so too did the form and function of summer resorts.²⁰ Away from these urban tensions and upheavals, resorts could provide a sense of freedom and control of recreational and social space. Racial and ethnic minority groups may have felt that they lacked spatial control in the city, and to different extents, most of them did. Unlike public pools, parks, and other recreational spaces in the city, resorts were privately owned and catered primarily to people of the same race, ethnicity, and class status. They were more likely to be

¹⁸ “The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People,” 326.

¹⁹ Schneider succinctly sums up the tension: “Italians, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans thus occupied the bottom of New York’s occupational categories and endowed their children with few advantages to assist them in an economy gradually orienting itself to the production and distribution of services. These were blue-collar children competing in an increasingly white-collar city.” *Vampires, Dragons, and Egyptian Kings*, 31-32.

²⁰ Stradling makes this argument more broadly about the relationship between New York City and the Catskills: “The landscape is the result of a long, often contentious collaboration between city and country, one in which new ideas of nature and the countryside took hold.” *Making Mountains*, xxiii.

free from policing, from the prying eyes and disapproving glares of neighbors, from harassment or discrimination, and from unwanted guests. For white ethnics who had already left for New York City's suburbs, the resorts offered a space to recreate the sense of ethnic community they left behind.

Resorts were part of the process by which racial and ethnic minorities sought to claim recreational space for their own uses and needs. They provided a space for these groups to negotiate a sense of identity distinct from both white Anglo Americans and other racial and ethnic groups. Italian Americans, Puerto Ricans, and African Americans established and frequented resorts where they could feel "at home"—socializing and vacationing among people like themselves, negotiating postwar racial, ethnic, and class identities, creating a sense of community in the mountains, and participating in American consumer culture. In the midst of the many actual disruptions they faced in their daily lives, summer resorts provided vacationers with a sense of community and a sense of place.

Changes in the Resort Landscape

Just as New York City neighborhoods were changing after World War II, so, too, was the Catskills resort landscape. Wartime restrictions helped bolster the visibility and popularity of the Catskills resort area. The war stifled the ability of working- and middle-class New Yorkers to spend money freely, which increased the appeal of nearby resorts. Mountain resorts were affordable, accessible from New York City, and people could get there by train or boat, eliminating concerns about gas rationing. Wartime gas rationing actually worked in the resorts' favor, ensuring

that vacationers stayed in one place for an extended period of time rather than moving from one destination to the next. A local newspaper reported that in 1943, the average stay at summer resorts in New York was twelve days.²¹ When the war finally came to an end in 1945, years of frugality and caution unleashed pent-up demand for consumer goods and experiences, including vacations.

Vacationing became much more accessible, affordable, and desirable to middle- and working-class vacationers after World War II. The growth of the Catskills resort area was spurred by postwar prosperity, as well as trends that were under way in the interwar period—unionization, rising wages, increased paid vacation time, car ownership, and an expanding travel infrastructure.²² Families of modest means saved all year to afford the trip, and there was a diverse range of accommodations available to them, from bungalow colonies and small, intimate boarding houses to large, entertainment-packed resorts.²³

Every summer from Memorial Day to Labor Day, a cosmopolitan crowd of vacationers transformed the Catskills recreational landscape. In the Northern Catskills, individuals of mostly European ethnic backgrounds bought up boarding houses and hotels that had once catered to white Protestant, and then Jewish vacationers. Jewish vacationers had largely abandoned the area in favor of Sullivan

²¹ *Greene County Examiner-Recorder*, December 16, 1943.

²² *Are We There Yet?*, 2.

²³ Stradling notes, “working-class Jews placed a high priority on sending women and children to the country . . . The Borscht Belt grew largely because it could attract wealthy Jews even while providing for the poorest of tourists.” The same was true for other groups vacationing in the Catskills. See *Making Mountains*, 191.

County resorts.²⁴ The Laurel House, perched atop the Kaaterskill Falls in Haines Falls, offers a particularly striking example of this ethnic succession. One of the grand nineteenth century hotels, the Laurel House was built in 1852 to cater to wealthy white Protestant vacationers. Gentile patronage of the hotel dwindled in the 1910s, and a Jewish New Yorker, Nat Bernstein, purchased it in 1920. When Jewish patronage declined dramatically in the 1940s and 1950s, the hotel was sold to Virginia Cardinale and Carmela Carella, two Italian women from Brooklyn.²⁵ They even installed a “bright and shining pizza oven,” which, the *Brooklyn Eagle* noted, “is probably the only one of its kind in this area.”²⁶ It would not be for long. In the 1950s and 1960s, Italians established dozens of resorts and boarding houses in towns including Cairo, Acra, Hunter, Tannersville, and Haines Falls. Other European immigrants established resorts in the Northern Catskills, from Germans

²⁴ This is not to say that there were *no* resorts catering to native white populations; just that the landscape became much more diverse after World War II. In their 1958 survey of Catskills resorts, Eunice and George Grier identified a few towns that catered primarily to native white populations, such as Windham, New York, which they described as “largely native American.” The Grier’s survey will be examined in detail in Chapter 3. Eunice and George Grier to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, “Survey of Public Accommodations in Catskills Resort Area—Preliminary Report,” September 3, 1958, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, New York State Commission Against Discrimination (SCAD) Case Files, New York State Archives, Cultural Education Center, Albany, NY (hereafter cited as SCAD Case Files).

²⁵ For a discussion of the Jewish ownership of the Laurel House, see *Making Mountains*, 185. For the purchase of the Laurel House by Cardinale and Carella, see Deed of Sale from Nathan Bernstein and Sadie Bernstein to Virginia Cardinale and Carmela Carella (filed March 1, 1953), Greene County, New York, Deed Book 331, 105-107, Greene County Clerk’s Office, Catskill, New York.

²⁶ “Old Laurel House At Haines Falls Stages Comeback,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 27, 1954.

grouped in Purling and Round Top, to Irish concentrated in East Durham and Leeds.²⁷

Local residents in the southern Catskills and Shawangunk Mountains observed similar diversity. African American resorts could be found along the path of Route 209, winding through Ulster, Sullivan, and Orange counties on the western side of the Shawangunk Ridge. They were also located on the opposite side of the Ridge, in Pine Bush, Burlingham, and Bloomingburg. Jewish resorts were thriving throughout the Catskills resort area, but especially in Sullivan County. East of the Catskill and Shawangunk Mountains, more Italian, Spanish and—in growing numbers—Puerto Rican vacationers flocked to the hamlet of Plattekill.

By the mid-1960s, there were more than twenty Spanish and Puerto Rican resorts in the small hamlet of Plattekill.²⁸ Like their Italian and African American counterparts, Puerto Rican New Yorkers began venturing north to the mountains in large numbers in the postwar period. Although Puerto Ricans began migrating to the United States well before World War II, their numbers increased dramatically in the 1940s and 1950s. Those who could afford a trip to the mountains began visiting Spanish boarding houses in Plattekill during the same time period. Most of the Spanish places were eventually bought up by Puerto Ricans and, by the 1960s, they were predominantly—although not exclusively—patronized by Puerto Ricans.

²⁷ Much like Italian resorts, many other European ethnics established boarding houses in the Catskills in the 1920s and 1930s, and their numbers grew dramatically in the decades following World War II. And although these groups tended to cluster in these areas, these were not the only places that they established resorts. "Survey of Public Accommodations in Catskills Resort Area—Preliminary Report," 6-7.

²⁸ "Puerto Ricans Go to the Catskills," *New York Times*, August 7, 1965.

Newspaper advertisements provide a window into the growing popularity of summer resorts after World War II. A look at the resort advertising section of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* in 1935 and a decade and a half later in 1950 clearly illustrates the trend. In 1935, the advertising section of the newspaper listed ten Italian resorts in the Catskills.²⁹ In 1950, there were fifty-one.³⁰ African Americans, too, were vacationing in greater numbers: the number of black resorts grew noticeably in the late 1940s, before taking off in the 1950s and 60s. In 1956, there were fourteen black resorts in the Catskills advertised in the *New York Amsterdam News* "Summer Vacation Guide"; by 1960, there were twenty-one.³¹

The natural environment remained an important draw for vacationers of all races and ethnicities in the postwar decades. Many resorts continued to entice visitors with the promise that the mountains could work wonders in curing the many ills of urban life. Drawing a direct contrast between the hot, claustrophobic city streets and the airy, life-sustaining country environment, the Shangri-La Country Club, an African American resort in Napanoch, invited visitors to "Beat The Heat Get Away From The City 'JOIN THE COUNTRY SET AND LIVE' at THE SHANGRI-LA COUNTRY CLUB".³² Similarly, a 1959 advertisement for the Spanish-owned Villa Garcia urged potential visitors to spend their vacation on a farm "surrounded by

²⁹ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 4, 1935.

³⁰ *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 9, 1950.

³¹ "Summer Vacation Guide," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 11, 1956; "Vacation Time," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 16, 1960.

³² Advertisement for the Shangri-La Country Club in "Summer Vacation Guide," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 6, 1957.

165 acres of fruit trees.”³³ Most resorts, regardless of which racial or ethnic group they catered to, still advertised outdoor activities including swimming, fishing, hunting, tennis, badminton, and basketball.

Despite these continuities, resort life changed dramatically in the 1950s and 1960s. Over time, the emphasis on relaxing on a farm or taking in the cool mountain air faded. Instead, entertainment and socializing received top billing.³⁴ African American resort postcards illuminate the shift in vacationing habits in the postwar years. An early postcard from King’s Lodge in Otisville, New York, featured a small photograph of proprietor M.C. Owens, in cowboy attire, set off from a larger photograph of cows grazing in a picturesque pasture.³⁵ A closer look reveals two individuals standing alongside the cows, watching them graze. The postcard conveys an idealized image of farm life in a peaceful environment, where nature was the primary attraction [Figure 5].

³³ *La Prensa*, June 18, 1959.

³⁴ Elizabeth Cromley, “A Room With a View,” in *Resorts of the Catskills*, 16.

³⁵ The postcard is undated, but the style and content (and contrast with later, dated King’s Lodge postcards) suggests that it was published sometime in the 1940s.

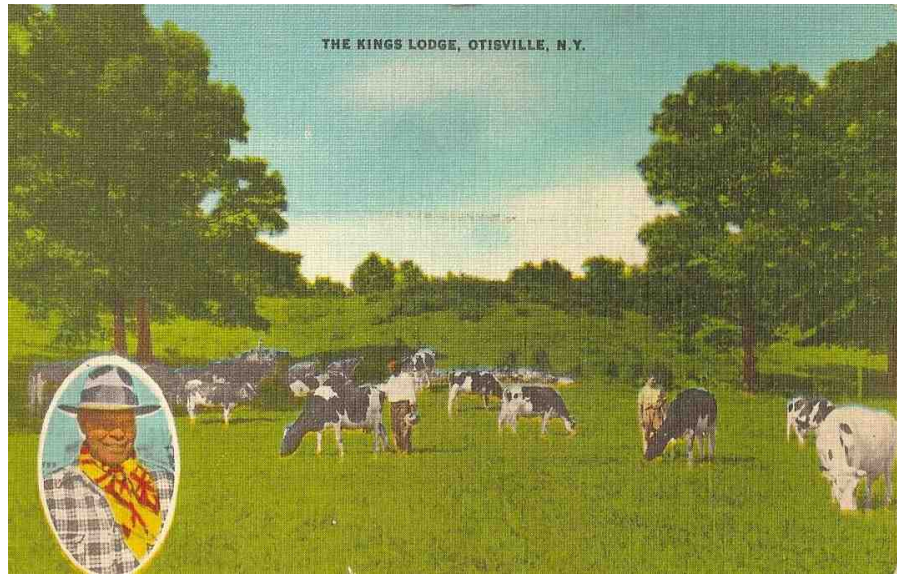


Figure 5. Early postcard from King's Lodge resort in Otisville, New York. Many early resorts were working farms that took in boarders during the summer months; their advertisements and promotional materials emphasized farm life and the natural environment. Source: Ad-View Post Cards, Newark, New Jersey.

In the postwar decades, modern buildings, amenities, and the vacationers themselves became the focal point of resort postcards. A striking 1965 King's Lodge postcard illustrates how much had changed. The postcard features vacationers posing in and around the resort pool, with a motel building in the background. The natural environment is nearly non-existent; trees serve as a very distant backdrop to the social environment. The image focuses on the resort pool and the guests enjoying it: sunbathing women in stylish swimsuits, attractive young couples squeezing together on lounge chairs, and guests splashing and swimming in the water [Figure 6]. It provides a stark contrast to earlier King's Lodge postcards, and points to the changing nature of resort vacations in the 1950s and 1960s. A 1954

Newburgh News article neatly summarized the change: “Gone are the days for ‘roughing it.’ The crowds knock themselves out, rather than rest and relax.”³⁶



Figure 6. 1965 postcard from King's Lodge resort in Otisville, New York. Summer resorts became an integral part of New York City's African American social scene in the postwar decades. Source: Bill Bard Associates Inc., Monticello, New York.

In the 1950s and 1960s, vacationers of all races and ethnicities had higher standards, greater opportunities for travel, and more money to spend. Resort owners felt pressure to modernize, expand, and provide more luxurious accommodations in order to meet their guests' changing (and growing) expectations. In 1948, the Ulster-Greene Counties Vacationland committee, a booster organization that promoted the resort area, acknowledged the growing competition: “the whole world is after the American traveler's dollar and they're all inviting vacationists to their wonders and delights. . . the American traveler has been educated to high standards and facilities and that they will no longer put up

³⁶ “Vacation Boom Record Seen For Plattekill This Year,” *The Newburgh News*, June 25, 1954.

with conditions they had to accept during the war.”³⁷ In this competitive climate, resort owners and other local businessmen and women had to work harder than ever to appeal to vacationers.

Intense competition between resorts further transformed the resort area. Smaller mom and pop establishments, so-called “rocking-chair” boarding houses that were once the norm in the Catskills, found it harder to weather the changes.³⁸ Although many continued to operate, small boarding houses like the Villa Palermo found it difficult to compete with many of the larger, more luxurious resorts that emerged in the 1940s and 1950s. George Algozzine, Jr. recalled that he frequently drove Villa Palermo guests who were seeking nighttime entertainment to nearby Italian resorts including Acra Manor and Pine Springs. Both were larger resorts that had capacious, designated nightclubs that brought in well-known entertainers and could accommodate many more people. For Algozzine, the Catskills as he once knew them—the mountains filled with small boarding houses like his parents’—began declining after World War II. Whereas in the 1920s and 30s many patrons expected and accepted modest accommodations, in the postwar period they demanded modern amenities. Whether due to lack of capital, space constraints, or an unwillingness to change, resorts that could not meet these demands often suffered.

³⁷ “Resort Owners Advised Get Ready for Summer,” *Greene County Examiner-Recorder*, April 15, 1948.

³⁸ “Survey of Public Accommodations in Catskills Resort Area—Preliminary Report,” 2.

Other resort owners expanded their businesses to keep pace with competitors and meet their clients' new demands. A modern nightclub was high on the priority list. M. C. Owens, the founding owner of King's Lodge, was initially resistant to the idea of having a bar at his resort.³⁹ He changed his mind in 1942, when Sally Walker opened Paradise Farm, an African American resort in nearby Cuddebackville. Charles and Dolly Godfrey, the second-generation owners of King's Lodge, recalled that the new resort, popular for its bar culture and nighttime entertainment, "came to be quite a competitor for King's Lodge"—so much so, that they "found it necessary to really have a nice clubhouse."⁴⁰ This kind of intense pressure ensured that many resorts underwent an endless stream of improvements and additions to keep pace with their competitors.

Competition also ramped up between resort areas within the Catskills region. This was particularly true in Greene and Ulster Counties in the northern Catskills. In the nineteenth century, this area was considered *the* Catskills. In the postwar decades "the Catskills" increasingly described a much wider area, stretching south into Sullivan and even Orange counties.⁴¹ As the southern Catskills grew in popularity, the distinctions between the two regions became increasingly apparent. In particular, the northern resort area had been established, loved, and—sadly—abused as a popular vacation region for more than a century. A 1958 report about

³⁹ Charles Godfrey recalled that Owens "was afraid that a lot of folks didn't know how to handle liquor." This attitude may have reflected Owen's desire for the resort to appear respectable and refined to the local white community in Otisville, as described in Chapter 1. Charles and Dolly Godfrey, interview by Keith Taylor.

⁴⁰ Charles and Dolly Godfrey, interview by Keith Taylor.

⁴¹ *Making Mountains*, 180.

the Catskills resort area observed: “In parts of both the north and south, *most distressingly in Greene County* [emphasis added], the natural beauty of the areas has been badly damaged by billboards, unattractive and poorly-kept resorts, pizza stands, and other man-made contrivances. In general, the southern areas appear more prosperous and more carefully maintained”.⁴² Whereas the “old” Catskills were growing dilapidated, worn, and visibly commercialized, many of the resorts being built in Sullivan County appeared new, clean, and fresh.

Some local residents believed that the northern Catskills’ economic health was in jeopardy. In 1950, the white members of the Greene County Resort Association painted a dismal picture: “For quite some time it has been noticed that in our resort county, business has fallen off to some considerable extent. . . . this trend must be recognized as harmful, and counteracted in every possible way.”⁴³ Despite this doomsday scenario, it seems more likely that the *kind* of business decreased—indeed, throughout the Catskills, from Greene County south into Ulster, Sullivan, and Orange counties, business was thriving for African American and European immigrant resort owners. It was resorts catering to white Protestant vacationers that were declining.

Areas south of the Greene County Catskills weathered the postwar changes particularly well. Jewish resorts expanded dramatically in Sullivan County in the postwar period. The *Republican Watchman* newspaper based in Monticello, New York, observed enthusiastically that 1947 was shaping up to be a strong year—

⁴² “Survey of Public Accommodations in Catskills Resort Area—Preliminary Report,” 4.

⁴³ “Open Letter,” *Greene County Examiner-Recorder*, February 16, 1950.

traffic on the town's main thoroughfare was "the heaviest it has ever been," a restaurateur claimed his business was up twenty-five percent from the previous year, the post office was keeping busy, "and the streets seem to be crowded with more people than ever."⁴⁴ Puerto Rican resorts in Plattekill were thriving too. A local resident recalled the weekend rush of vacationers: "We're not talking about a few people, we're talking about busloads! . . . And cars. And they didn't even know where to put the cars, you could hardly even drive down the road, because people were walking in between 'em."⁴⁵

In the decades following World War II, the Catskills became more popular, more diverse, and more segregated than ever. African Americans, Italians, and Puerto Ricans, along with many other ethnic minorities vacationing in the Catskills, contributed collectively to the dramatic transformation of the resort landscape in the postwar period. Despite the resorts' many commonalities, however, each group created their own recreational spaces in which they could negotiate their distinct racial, ethnic, and class identities.

"I Built It for You, Now Enjoy It with Me": African American Resorts

Urban middle-class blacks joined the hordes of summer vacationers making the weekly procession upstate to Catskills resorts in search of entertainment, dancing, outdoor recreation, and romance. African Americans shared in the nation's

⁴⁴ "Resort Season Now At Its Peak," *Republican Watchman*, August 1, 1947.

⁴⁵ Anonymous Plattekill resident, interview by author, Plattekill, NY, January 19, 2013. This interview was confidential; the name of the interviewee is withheld by mutual agreement.

postwar prosperity, and sought to engage in the conspicuous consumption of travel and leisure practices much like other Americans. The black middle class expanded dramatically after World War II, boosted by growing educational and job opportunities and rising incomes—although not at the same rate as white Americans. The ability to afford a resort vacation signaled their achievement of a middle-class lifestyle. Vacationing continued to serve as a means for wealthier African Americans to put social and economic distance between themselves and poorer African Americans.⁴⁶ But despite their move into “the middle class,” black travelers knew that Northern de facto segregation was as tenacious and prevalent as ever. Black resort culture therefore reflected middle-class African Americans’ desire to partake in the postwar consumption of tourism *and* to engage in these pursuits in an environment insulated from the racism of white society.⁴⁷ Resorts offered a space where they could congregate, let loose, and enjoy their leisure time, but also socialize, conduct business, air their grievances, and organize outside the view of white society. Thousands of people responded to the inhumanity of Jim Crow by creating a thriving black vacation industry in the Catskills.

Business was booming for black resort owners in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s because the resorts fulfilled these undeniable needs. The postwar decades witnessed both the expansion of established resorts like King’s Lodge in Otisville,

⁴⁶ See *Uplifting the Race*, 2.

⁴⁷ Scholarship discussing postwar African American tourism in other locations includes Alison Rose Jefferson, “African American Leisure Space in Santa Monica: The Beach Sometimes Known as the ‘Inkwell,’ 1900s-1960s,” *Southern California Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (Summer 2009), 155-189; *Are We There Yet?*, 68-91; and Lewis Walker and Ben C. Wilson, *Black Eden: The Idlewild Community* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2002).

and the opening of many new ones like Peg Leg Bates Country Club. Resorts underwent ever-increasing renovations, and hosted a seemingly unending stream of vacationers. By day, they provided a natural retreat for urbanites wanting to escape the city, or groups seeking a meeting space for a variety of social and political functions. By night, they offered visitors late-night socializing, top-rate entertainment, and the possibility of romance. They became a favorite topic of black newspapers' society pages, with columns such as George Jackson's "Trip Tips," Sara Slack's "Where in the World Are You Going?" and Edwina Johnson's "Round the Resorts" regularly giving readers a run down of prominent black families vacationing in the Catskills.⁴⁸ The resorts became renowned even beyond the East Coast. *Ebony* magazine regularly featured advertisements for Catskills resorts, and *Jet* magazine and the *Chicago Defender* columns "Swinging the News" and "Zig and Zag with Ziggy Johnson," offered occasional reports about them.⁴⁹ In the summer months, African American resorts like Peg Leg Bates Country Club in Kerhonkson, and Paradise Farm Resort in Cuddebackville became integral to affluent African Americans' social, cultural, and political lives.

Clayton "Peg Leg" Bates was born in 1907 in the farming community of Fountain Inn, South Carolina. He began dancing regularly—if clandestinely—when he was only five years old: "My mother and grandmother both was Baptist, and in

⁴⁸ See for example "Trip Tips," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 26, 1958, "Where in the World Are You Going?" *New York Amsterdam News*, June 27, 1959, and "Round the Resorts," *New York Age*, August 1, 1953.

⁴⁹ See for example "Vacation Guide," *Ebony*, June 1963, 129-141; "Cocktail Chit Chat," *Jet*, February 17, 1966, 39, and "Party Fare," *Jet*, June 17, 1954, 44; "Swinging the News," November 19, 1955, and "Zig and Zag with Ziggy Johnson," November 7, 1953.

the south during those days dancing, as far as Christianity and religion is concerned, it was a no-no.”⁵⁰ As he got older, he began “challenging” other young dancers in school in an effort to win the attention of his female classmates: “And if I do say so myself—now this was before I lost a leg—if I do say so myself, I was pretty good!” But his potential as a two-legged dancer was cut short by a devastating accident in 1918. Only twelve years old, Bates convinced his mother to lie about his age so that he could work in a nearby linseed oil mill. Only three days into the job, the power went out and Bates stepped into an open auger. The machine badly mangled his leg, which was promptly amputated on his mother’s kitchen table. As a “little black boy in the south at that particular time, I wasn’t even worth taking to the hospital,” he said.⁵¹

As Bates recovered, he was eager to start dancing again. His uncle, an amateur dancer himself, observed Bates tapping out rhythms with his crutches, and decided to fashion him a peg leg. Bates added a strap to keep it in place, a cushion to protect his knee, and eventually, a tap on the peg, and began dancing in amateur variety shows at southern black theaters. By the mid-1920s, Bates (who had now adopted the “Peg Leg” moniker) had made his way to New York City. He was enamored with New York, and Harlem in particular: “I didn’t think this was seventh heaven, I thought this was first heaven. . . *I never saw so many black people in all my life. Everybody was well dressed, their manners, black people had everything, the*

⁵⁰ Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates, interview by Rusty Frank, Kerhonkson, NY, June 10 – June 24, 1993, CD #1 of 6, Jazz Oral History Program Collection, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

⁵¹ Bates, interview, CD #1 of 6.

style, the dressing, the food, the—*oh man!* I just couldn't believe it."⁵² Harlem returned the love. An extraordinary dancer, Bates quickly became a huge sensation and performed at all the major Harlem theaters and nightclubs—from the Lafayette and the Apollo to Small's Paradise and Connie's Inn.

By the 1940s and 1950s, Bates was hired to perform at well-known Jewish resorts in the Catskill Mountains including Grossinger's, the Concord, and the Nevele.⁵³ Despite being a top performer on the "Borscht Circuit," he was not allowed to stay at the hotels after his performances: "One time I had one-thousand dollars in my pocket and no place to go."⁵⁴ Bates's experience of discrimination in the Catskills led him to conceive of a resort where African Americans could enjoy recreation and leisure in an environment comparable to those frequented by white vacationers but free from discrimination.

Bates recalled a conversation with his brother-in-law, Joseph "Bubba" Sampson, at a rehearsal for a show at Grossinger's:

I looked around and I saw . . . *all these people*, having such a good time. Horseback riding, swimming, playing tennis . . . I said, "Bubba, how many black people do you see out there?" He said, "I don't see no black people out there Peg, you know black people can't come here." I said, "That's just what the point is." I said, "Bubba, wouldn't it be nice, if black people had a nice place like this to come to, just like any other race of people?" Bubba said, "Yeah Peg, it would be nice, but it's far-fetched. It'll never happen."⁵⁵

⁵² Bates, interview, CD #2 of 6.

⁵³ Bates, interview, CD #6 of 6.

⁵⁴ Victor J. DiSanto, "Peg Leg Bates and the Peg Leg Bates Country Club," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History*, Vol. 26, Iss. 1, viewed 22 April, 2008, Proquest, document ID 494776491.

⁵⁵ Bates, interview, CD #6 of 6. Bates's daughter, Melodye Bates-Holden, noted that Sampson was a real estate agent, and Bates probably arranged the

In 1952, Bates's dream was realized when he opened Peg Leg Bates Country Club, a resort on the property of a former turkey farm in Kerhonkson, New York. Bates opened his resort with the intention of it being an integrated environment, but the resort's slogan, "I built it for you, now enjoy it with me," was clearly directed at a black audience. Ziggy Johnson, a columnist in the *Defender*, proclaimed that Peg Leg Bates Country Club would be "the Grossinger's for eastern Sepia America." By comparing the resort to the famous Jewish resort in Sullivan County, Johnson staked a claim for the resort and its aspirations for success in the Catskills recreational landscape.⁵⁶ Peg Leg Bates Country Club would grow to be one of the largest, best-known, and longest running black resorts in the Catskills. It eventually accommodated 300 guests, and featured a dining room and bar, a casino with first-rate entertainment (including show girls, jazz musicians, and tap dancers), a picnic pavilion, souvenir shop, two swimming pools, a roller skating rink, basketball courts, tennis courts, and a miniature golf course, among other recreational facilities [Figure 7].⁵⁷ Although a majority of the resort guests came from the New York

purchase with his assistance. Melodye Bates-Holden, interview by author, Kerhonkson, NY, April 6, 2008.

⁵⁶ "Zig and Zag with Ziggy Johnson," *Chicago Defender*, November 7, 1953. Stradling notes that the title of Harold Taub's 1952 book about Grossinger's, *Waldorf in the Catskills*, "clearly indicated the high style the large hotel hoped to achieve." While Grossinger's aspired to Waldorf stature, smaller resorts like Peg Leg Bates Country Club aspired to Grossinger's fame; see *Making Mountains*, 198.

⁵⁷ "Peg Leg Is Now Running Own Bates Country Club," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, November 26, 1966"; "Peg Leg Bates Country Club One Of The Finest," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 22, 1967; "Pegleg Bates Says He's Ready For '70," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 14, 1970; "A Vacation Oasis: Peg Leg's Place," *New Pittsburgh Courier*, August 6, 1977.

metropolitan area, Peg Leg Bates Country Club attracted visitors from all over the country.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Bates occasionally advertised in black newspapers outside of New York City, including the *Baltimore Afro-American* and *Pittsburgh Courier*. See advertisement in *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 3, 1963, and in the *Afro-American*, April 13, 1968.



Figure 7. Peg Leg Bates, as seen on the cover of a travel brochure for Peg Leg Bates Country Club, ca. 1970. Source: Steingart Associates, Inc., South Fallsburg, New York.

A decade earlier, in 1942, Sally Walker purchased a small farm in Cuddebackville for \$2,500 and established a summer resort, Paradise Farm, to cater to affluent African American vacationers from New York City.⁵⁹ Walker, the enterprising owner of Sally's Kitchen restaurant on West 139th Street in Harlem, faced challenges from the outset.⁶⁰ She found that it was difficult to even purchase property in the Catskills because of discriminatory real estate practices: she "said she had to bet a white friend and then win the bet in order to purchase the land. At that time, no one was selling properties to Blacks."⁶¹ Despite this initial struggle, Walker ultimately built a vastly profitable summer resort. By 1954, Paradise Farm spanned 300 acres, was valued at \$400,000, and had a clientele that featured guests from all around the world [Figure 8].⁶² In 1959, she expanded the resort property by purchasing the nearby White Horse Lodge resort for an undisclosed amount "estimated to be in excess of \$100,000." Reports in the black press claimed that the purchase made Paradise Farm "the largest individually owned Negro resort in America."⁶³ Walker's sharp business acumen and success led the *Afro-American* newspaper to proclaim her "A Woman With a Midas Touch."⁶⁴

⁵⁹ "Where in the World Are You Going?," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 27, 1959; "Woman With A Midas Touch," *Afro-American*, September 18, 1954.

⁶⁰ "Cocktail Chit Chat," *Jet*, February 17, 1966, 39.

⁶¹ Sally Walker never mentioned what the specific terms of the bet were. "Fire Sweeps Paradise Farms," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 13, 1975.

⁶² "Woman With A Midas Touch."

⁶³ The White Horse Lodge was a white-owned resort that catered to black vacationers; Walker's purchase made it a black-owned resort that catered to black vacationers. "N. Y. Resort Owner Buys \$100,000 Mountain Lodge," *Jet*, July 23, 1959, 52; "Mrs. Walker Purchases Resort For \$100,000," *Daily Defender*, July 9, 1959.

⁶⁴ "Woman With A Midas Touch."



Figure 8. Postcard painted by artist Alfred S. Landis showing an “aerial” view of Paradise Farm resort in Cuddebackville, New York, ca. 1950s. Landis’s rendering captures the resort during a period of tremendous growth and expansion. Source: A. S. Landis, Wurtsboro, New York.

The narratives that Peg Leg Bates and Sally Walker told about the origins of their resorts share a common theme: both emphasized the discrimination they overcame in order to build their successful businesses. Both Walker and Bates recognized the need for black resorts that were separate *but equal* to the segregated white resorts and hotels of the Catskills.⁶⁵ Together with many other African American entrepreneurs, they helped create a vast black vacationland in the Catskills in the postwar decades.

Black resorts varied greatly in size, amenities, clientele, and reputation. Utopia Lodge in Greenfield Park opened in the early 1960s and became popular for

⁶⁵ Historian Robert R. Weyeneth uses the term “alternative spaces” to describe businesses, schools, hospitals, and other institutions run by black entrepreneurs for a black clientele. Weyeneth, “The Architecture of Racial Segregation: The Challenges of Preserving the Problematical Past,” *The Public Historian* 27, no. 4 (Fall 2005), 34.

its day and nighttime socializing. The resort catered to a stylish younger set; it held frequent fashion shows and beauty pageants, and the “Pussycat Lounge” nightclub featured go-go dancers and a house band. In a nod to resort nightlife, a *New York Amsterdam News* article emphasized that Wickie Wackie Country Club in High Falls “caters to late sleepers.”⁶⁶ Smaller resorts like Smith Haven in Pine Bush and Rainbow Acres in Kerhonkson offered visitors a more intimate and low-key vacation in the mountains.⁶⁷

During the day visitors at African American resorts could eat and socialize with friends and family, play outdoor sports, and swim in the pool. A few resorts had private lakes where guests could boat and fish. Many advertised the nearby availability of horseback riding facilities, which was offered at ranches including the Clove Valley Dude Ranch in High Falls, and Lang’s Ranch in Rosendale. For guests who wanted to look their best, Paradise Farm offered a beauty parlor and barbershop. Many resorts hosted special events on the weekends, including beauty pageants, fashion shows, and other social activities. Church groups and social clubs often planned weekend trips to the resorts, and, in later years, buses from the New York metropolitan area ferried passengers back and forth on Saturdays and Sundays for picnicking day trips. Vacationer James E. Churchman, Jr. from Newark, New

⁶⁶ “Where in the World Are You Going?,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 27, 1959.

⁶⁷ Advertisement for “Peg-Leg Bates Country Club,” in “Ready . . . Set . . . Go On Vacation,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 19, 1965; Sara Slack, “Where in the World Are You Going?” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 29, 1959; “Modern Utopia Lodge Ready For Its Guest,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 21, 1966; Advertisement for Smith Haven in “Vacation Time,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 23, 1960; Melvina A. Jackson, “Vacationland Notes,” *Afro-American*, June 22, 1957.

Jersey, who vacationed at Paradise Farm resort every summer from 1950 to 1963, described resort life as “just a very free spirited thing, you know. People used to be able to find and do whatever they wanted to do.”⁶⁸ The resorts seemed to have something for everyone.

The resorts also featured nighttime entertainment. Peg Leg Bates Country Club was a particularly popular spot for nightlife, and Bates referred to his resort as the “Home of the Celebrities.” Bates was quite a celebrity in his own right. In addition to his years of performing in black theaters up and down the east coast, in 1950 he became the first black performer to appear on the Ed Sullivan Show, and eventually set the record for most appearances on the show, at twenty-one.⁶⁹ Bates’s celebrity status ensured that his Country Club attracted well-known performers, and his resort was particularly popular for its nightclub shows and adult entertainment. Visitors could have a drink at Bates’s “knotty pine bar,” and on weekends the resort featured a live variety show and dancing. James Churchman’s daughter, Edith Churchman, recalled that in the evenings her parents would sometimes leave Paradise Farm to go to Peg Leg Bates Country Club—but as a child the resort “was like big forbidden territory and we just never knew what was there at Peg Leg Bates.”⁷⁰ Melodye Bates-Holden, Peg Leg Bates’s daughter, recalled unexpectedly encountering strippers staying in the cottage next to her house when she was five or six years old. Her mother quickly ushered her out of the cottage, and

⁶⁸ James E. Churchman, Jr., interview by author, Newark, NJ, March 19, 2008.

⁶⁹ Bates, interview, CD #6 of 6.

⁷⁰ Edith Churchman, interview by author, Newark, NJ, March 19, 2008.

told her they were part of the evening entertainment.⁷¹ The resort featured such a constant stream of entertainment and socializing that one journalist warned readers: “if you have any form of heart trouble and need rest and quietness DON’T come here!”

Being able to afford a trip to the Catskills was a point of pride for middle class African Americans. Vacationing allowed them to assert their social status in ways that they could not in their New York City neighborhoods. In comparison to postwar Italian resorts, African American resorts projected a much more elite image; however, the cost to vacation at both was about the same. For example, in 1958 the Notch Mountain House, an exclusive African American resort in Hunter, New York, was charging \$45 and up per week for rooms.⁷² In the same year, the Italian Pine Springs resort was charging \$48-58 per week, and the Jolly House—considered by some Italians to be a “lower-class” Italian resort, was charging \$48 to \$55.⁷³ This suggests that there was a discrepancy, in material terms, between the meaning of “middle class” for African Americans and Italian Americans. By engaging in a traditionally white consumer practice, African American New Yorkers made

⁷¹ Bates-Holden, interview.

⁷² “Summer Vacation Guide,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 28, 1958.

⁷³ Arthur P. Swerdlove to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, “American Jewish Congress vs. Pine Springs, Case No. CP-3924-55, Investigation Report,” and Arthur P. Swerdlove to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, “American Jewish Congress vs. Laub’s View House, Case No. CP-3919-55, Investigation Report,” October 23, 1958 (note that Laub’s View House was sold and reopened under new ownership as the Jolly House, but SCAD left the case name the same); in American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, SCAD case files.

themselves middle class, even when their actual economic status was much more tenuous.⁷⁴

Resorts could be sites of conspicuous consumption and displays of wealth. There were particularly prosperous vacationers who spent their money freely: in July 1953, *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist Izzy Rowe gossiped, “Last week, one of Harlem’s prominent attorneys journeyed up [to Shangri-La Country Club in Napanoch, New York] with a party of twenty guests in a fleet of Cadillacs and picked up the entire tab himself.”⁷⁵ Similarly, in 1954, *Jet* magazine reported:

New York fourth estaters [journalists] set a record at Sally Walker’s Paradise Farms, consumed seven cases of champagne, five cases of sparkling burgundy, an undetermined quantity of Scotch and rye during a week-end party. Hostess Sally reserved 32 rooms and suites for the guests, imported band music and entertainers—and checked off the bill at \$1,000.⁷⁶

Even guests who could not afford to pay for an entourage of friends or consume cases of sparkling wine still embraced and reveled in the social cachet that a trip to the mountains afforded them. They took great satisfaction in being able to dress up, hop in the car, and drive to the mountain for a week or two at a time, where they could enjoy a leisurely getaway with other middle class black vacationers.

⁷⁴ In *Uplifting the Race*, Gaines notes that what African Americans perceived to be the “black middle class” (and the occupations they associated with that status) was often out of line with the meaning of “middle class” for white Americans: “Occupations within the black community widely perceived by historians as middle-class, including that of teacher, minister, federal officeholder, businessman, and professional, cannot be regarded as equivalent with the business, managerial, and craft labor occupations among whites from which blacks were largely excluded.” *Uplifting the Race*, 14.

⁷⁵ “Izzy Rowe’s Notebook,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 25, 1953.

⁷⁶ “Party Fare,” *Jet*, June 17, 1954, 44.

According to Edith Churchman, it was the kind of place “that you could say to your friends, ‘Golly, we’re going to the Catskills this weekend’ and ‘We’re going to the Catskills for a week,’ and I think that was a big thrill in and of itself.”⁷⁷ Her emphasis on the pride she felt underscores the extent to which the mountains became an integral part of the black middle-class social scene. She observed, “I think for us it was a place where we could go, we knew we could socialize with other black families of the same, um [hesitates]—I don’t want to say social strata but of the same kind of economic background.”⁷⁸ Irene Gandy made a similar observation: “You meet all these educators and all these teachers and all these women and men, you know, all these—I hate that word, ‘middle class,’ but just working, there’s no such thing as the middle class, you’ve got enough to do what you want to do or you don’t . . . but there’s so many working people that were spending money, having fun, that you didn’t have to go to church to see them.”⁷⁹ Although both Churchman and Gandy hesitated in emphasizing vacationers’ shared class background, the reality is that it was still primarily privileged African Americans who could afford a vacation. This was, without a doubt, part of the resorts’ appeal.

Vacationers’ shared class status also made the resorts an ideal place to seek suitable marriage partners. Resort owners recognized this function of resort life, and many actively promoted it. In 1954 the White Horse Lodge offered a free vacation to couples that married after first meeting at the resort, and to couples who honeymooned at the White Horse Lodge and returned for their fifth wedding

⁷⁷ Edith Churchman, interview.

⁷⁸ Edith Churchman, interview.

⁷⁹ Irene Gandy, phone interview by author, August 6, 2010.

anniversary. Owner Dorothy Lukin noted in 1954 that, "Quite a few are eligible this year."⁸⁰ Once married, many couples that met at the resorts returned for their honeymoons, which were dutifully reported on in the black press. In turn, this publicity brought more romance-seeking vacationers to the resorts. Resort owners were not immune from this trend, either: Dolly Owens, M.C. Owens' daughter, met her future husband Charlie Godfrey at King's Lodge in 1946.⁸¹

Summer resorts became hubs of social, economic, and religious life and important sites of "congregation" for the black middle class. In the words of historian Earl Lewis:

Afro-Americans discovered that even though they could not always secure the range of improvements desired, they could begin to frame their own reality. In their efforts, they modified the political language so that segregation became congregation; in so doing, they used structural limitations to achieve a certain degree of autonomy and, by extension, power.⁸²

The sense of power and autonomy that black vacationers derived from gathering in the Catskills was evident in the many functions that resorts served. Irene Gandy compared the resorts to lodges or social clubs. They provided spaces where people "talked about what they needed to do and who could help each other . . . deals were made . . . relationships forged, somebody knew somebody to get their kid in school . . . Those are the kinds of people you meet that can give information that you may not be privy to."⁸³ The resorts frequently hosted a variety of social clubs, which further

⁸⁰ "Vacation Notes," *New York Amsterdam News*, 29 May 1954.

⁸¹ Dolly and Charles Godfrey, interview with Keith Taylor.

⁸² Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 90.

⁸³ Gandy, interview.

solidified this business and networking function. For example, Paradise Farm regularly welcomed a variety of groups, such as the Optimist Business and Social Club, the Wenkroy Social Club (black employees of the New York City Housing Authority), and the Georgetonians (New Yorkers originally from Georgetown, South Carolina).⁸⁴ The Royal Manor Lodge in Bloomingburg advertised “Special Rates to Church and Organized Groups.”⁸⁵ Far away from the city and out of view of white society, this “congregation” culture flourished in the Catskills.

Just as de facto segregation provided the impetus for the creation of African American resorts, it also made some of them extremely profitable. In this sense, de facto segregation was a double-edged sword for black resort owners. Resort owners were conscious of their position within the black community and aware of the financial and social benefits that resort ownership provided. In the postwar decades, resort owners’ uplift impulse was evident in their belief that they had a responsibility to give back to the populations they served. Many resorts hired black students in the summer to help them pay for college. Charles Godfrey noted that “in order to qualify as a waiter at King’s Lodge you had to have an objective to go to college. And so they would come here and work, and we wouldn’t pay them until they left. . . . When they went back they had money to go to college. And out of that

⁸⁴ African Americans who were part of the Great Migration North and West often formed regional clubs wherever they settled; the Georgetonians were one such club. See *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 240. For the articles cited about social clubs at Catskills resorts see: “Through the Lens,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 8, 1953; “Ladies Day,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 23, 1969; “Georgetonians At Paradise Farms,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 2, 1952.

⁸⁵ *New York Amsterdam News*, September 2, 1961.

boys have become lawyers, doctors, accountants.”⁸⁶ Similarly, in 1978 the *New York Amsterdam News* reported that in Peg Leg Bates Country Club’s twenty-five years of operation, Bates had hired 375 high school students to work at the resort. Of those 375 students, 290 enrolled in college upon graduating from high school.⁸⁷ In hiring young African Americans, black resort owners contributed to the health of the population that kept their businesses viable, and aided other young, budding African Americans in obtaining an education and becoming professionals themselves. As sites of matchmaking and teenage romance, it also ensured that the children of middle-class vacationers would only meet other middle-class African Americans with suitable education and career aspirations.

In June 1959, seven black resort owners organized the Catskill Mountains Resort Owner’s Association (later shortened to the Catskill Mountains Resort Association, or CATMORESAS).⁸⁸ By 1965 CATMORESAS represented the owners of nine Catskills resorts, including Paradise Farm, Peg Leg Bates Country Club, and Utopia Lodge. Most of the organization’s efforts were focused on promoting and sustaining the popularity of the Catskills as a resort destination. They advertised collectively in the *New York Amsterdam News* during the summer months and hosted dances and balls in New York City to promote their resorts in the off-

⁸⁶ Dolly and Charles Godfrey, interview by the DCHA.

⁸⁷ “Pegleg Bates provides teen employment,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 16, 1978.

⁸⁸ Like the Catskills resort landscape as a whole, the resort owners’ associations were also racially segregated.

season.⁸⁹ They also engaged in philanthropic activities, seeking to give back to the African American community that sustained their businesses. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported that CATMORESAS gave “a substantial donation to the NAACP” in 1962, and sponsored a Y basketball team in Harlem in 1965, “as an aid to the youth of the Harlem community.”⁹⁰ This too reflected uplift impulse driving the black middle class.

For middle class African Americans, leisure itself was a form of resistance to white racism and segregation.⁹¹ Vacationing helped create a positive group identity and sense of status. By “shoring up a sense of dignity that was perpetually under assault,” they challenged white perceptions of African Americans as poor, lazy, and immoral.⁹² Resort owners built luxurious resorts where vacationers could relax, play, and socialize with family and friends, but also conduct business, organize, and make important social and political connections. In the decades after World War II, Catskills resorts played a vital role in shaping a black middle-class leisure culture that engaged in postwar American consumer culture, while also resisting white middle-class values.

⁸⁹ Catskill Mt. Resort Owner’s Association advertisement, “Vacation Time,” *New York Amsterdam News*, July 2, 1960.

⁹⁰ “Resort Assn. Holds Ball On Oct. 27,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 5, 1963, and “Resort Assn. Sponsoring ‘Y’ Team,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 9, 1965.

⁹¹ See Tera W. Hunter, “‘Work That Body’: African-American Women, Work, and Leisure in Atlanta and the New South,” in Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, and Bruce Laurie, eds., *Labor Histories: Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 153-174.

⁹² Kelley, Robin D. G. “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 1 (June 1993), 86.

The “Bocce Belt”: Italian American Resorts

In his 1974 book, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans*, Italian American Studies scholar Richard Gambino reminisced about his childhood summer vacations in the Catskill Mountains in the 1940s and early 1950s: “Every August I would go to one of these hotels with my parents. . . . I loved these holidays, which combined a chance to get into the country with the customs, food, and general social atmosphere of the old neighborhood in the city.”⁹³ Gambino’s memories illuminate the importance of summer resorts to Italian Americans in the postwar period. Italian resorts grew in step with the upward mobility of Italian Americans after World War II, expanding in number and size to accommodate the growing number of families that could afford a summer vacation. Their growing popularity also reflected significant changes in the city’s ethnic enclaves, as many Italian Americans moved Staten Island, Queens, Long Island, the Bronx, and other suburban areas outside of the city. Resorts provided a space for both urban and suburban Italian families to participate postwar consumer culture, while also negotiating and reinventing what it meant to be Italian American.

Ethnicity is not static; rather, it is a “process of construction” shaped by a variety of social, economic, and political factors.⁹⁴ In the early decades of the twentieth century, Italian identity was dramatically shaped by social reformers’ ongoing efforts to Americanize immigrants, the nativism of the 1920s, negotiations

⁹³ Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans* (1974; repr., 2nd ed., Toronto: Guernica, 1996), 150-151.

⁹⁴ “The Invention of Ethnicity,” 4-5.

between Italian immigrants and their American-born children, and neighborhood interactions with other racial and ethnic minorities.⁹⁵ Many Italians in the United States responded positively to Mussolini's calls for Italian unity and pride in the 1920s and 1930s, but they did an about-face at the outset of World War II.⁹⁶ When Italy entered the war in 1940, Italians came under intense pressure to demonstrate their loyalty to American society, and most quickly distanced themselves from Italy and its fascist dictator.⁹⁷ For most Italian immigrants and their children, Americanization trumped Italian pride when violent coercion and repression were at stake.

At the same time that Italians were trying to shed outward markers of their Italianness in the 1940s, they were also increasingly identifying as and benefiting from their status as white Americans. The two processes went hand in hand. Many sought to obscure their Italianness as a means of gaining acceptance by dominant white society.⁹⁸ Poet Diane di Prima observed that many Italians "felt that their culture, language, food, songs, music, identity, was a small price to pay for entering the American mainstream. Or they thought . . . that they could keep up these good

⁹⁵ See Simone Cinotto, "Sunday Dinner? You Had to Be There! The Social Significance of Food in Italian Harlem, 1920-1940," in Joseph Sciorra, ed., *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2011), 11-29; and Joan L. Saverino, "Italians in Public Memory: Pageantry, Power, and Imagining the 'Italian American' in Reading, Pennsylvania," in *Italian Folk*, 152-169.

⁹⁶ "Italians in Public Memory," 168.

⁹⁷ See Nancy C. Carnevale, "'No Italian Spoken for the Duration of the War': Language, Italian-American Identity, and Cultural Pluralism in the World War II Years," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 22, no. 3 (Spring 2003), 3-33.

⁹⁸ *Living the Revolution*, 231-240.

Italian things in private and become 'white' in public."⁹⁹ Italians' efforts to assert their whiteness were facilitated by a broad range of federal social welfare policies and programs passed in the 1930s and 1940s, from the 1935 Social Security Act to the 1944 Selective Service Readjustment Act (the G.I. Bill). These programs were intentionally crafted to exclude vast numbers of African Americans and other people of color, while strongly benefitting white ethnics and facilitating many Italians' move into the middle class.¹⁰⁰

Despite the growing acceptance and assimilation of European Americans in the postwar decades, however, ethnic affiliation and identity did not quickly fade into a monolithic white identity. In recent years, historians have begun reconsidering the process of European American assimilation after World War II.¹⁰¹ Looking at factors including education, class, labor, religion, and politics, historians

⁹⁹ Quoted in *Living the Revolution*, 231.

¹⁰⁰ Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005), 22-23 and Chapter 2 ("Welfare in Black and White"), and Chapter 5 ("White Veterans Only").

¹⁰¹ The combined work of historians including Ronald H. Bayor, Joshua B. Freeman, and Joshua M. Zeitz comes partially in response to "whiteness" studies such as David Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness* and Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Whiteness of a Different Color*, which contend that the ethnic and racial identities that once differentiated European immigrant groups in the United States largely coalesced into a unified white European identity by the 1940s and 1950s. See Ronald H. Bayor, "Another Look at 'Whiteness': The Persistence of Ethnicity in American Life," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 29, No. 1 (Fall 2009), 13-30; Joshua B. Freeman, "The Persistence and Demise of Ethnic Union Locals in New York City After World War II," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 26, No. 3 (Spring 2007), 5-22; Joshua M. Zeitz, *White Ethnic New York: Jews, Catholics, and the Shaping of Postwar Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2005).

including Joshua M. Zeitz, Ronald H. Bayor, and Joshua B. Freeman all conclude that ethnic identification remained strong even after immigrants' children and grandchildren were fully accepted as white. Building on Glazer and Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot*, Zeitz persuasively demonstrates "the surprising degree to which ethnicity retained a central place in [New York City's] cultural, social, and political landscape."¹⁰² Even taking into account postwar suburbanization, many of city's Jewish, Italian, and Irish residents continued to live in ethnically and racially segregated neighborhoods. Ethnic identity also continued to structure the social and cultural activities of many immigrant New Yorkers and their families. This was reflected in the immense success of ethnic resorts. In the words of Loretta Fede, co-owner of the Acra Manor resort in the town of Acra, "I mean you didn't *have* to be Italian to come here, but they were."¹⁰³

Italians struggled to reconcile the "Italian" and "American" aspects of their everyday lives in the postwar period, on both an individual and collective level. Italian identity was profoundly shaped by individuals' class status, occupation, neighborhood, and dominant cultural representations of Italians. Despite these individual differences, however, they collectively sought to redefine and express their identity in ways that would not call their whiteness and Americanness into question. Summer resorts provided an ideal space in which Italians could negotiate and enact their sense of Italianness, while publicly signaling their Americanization

¹⁰² *White Ethnic New York*, 7.

¹⁰³ Loretta and Val Fede, interview.

and participation in American consumer culture. Of course, the two processes were inextricably intertwined.

Italian resorts underwent a number of changes in the postwar period. Italian regional distinctions became less important; the children and grandchildren of Italian immigrants embraced a broader sense of unified Italian and Italian American identity.¹⁰⁴ They also wanted to be accepted as Americans and participate in postwar consumer culture. As vacationers became increasingly Americanized, so did their vacation preferences. Like other vacationers in the Catskills, Italians went to the resorts for good food, dancing, entertainment, outdoor recreation, and romance. Over time, Italian resorts offered an increasingly hybrid mixture of foods, customs, and recreational opportunities to cater to their guests' varied tastes. Although Italian American customers craved ravioli and bocce on their summer vacations, they also demanded an American breakfast, weenie roasts, nightclub shows, and modern hotel amenities.

Americanization was readily apparent in the resorts' menus. Lawrence Squeri recalled that some of the food at the Villa Belvedere was "not as Italian as you'd think." Breakfast, as remembered by both Squeri and George Algozzine, was

¹⁰⁴ One notable exception was the few resorts that catered to a Northern Italian clientele, like the Villa Belvedere in Monroe, New York. Lawrence Squeri vacationed at the resort in the early 1950s with his parents, who were immigrants from Parma. He recalled that his parents only associated with other people from Parma, and this extended to their summer vacations. The resort's proprietor, Remo Rossi, was also from Parma, as were most of his guests (with a smattering of other northern Italians). Squeri emphasized that the divisions between Northern and Southern Italians continued to remain salient in the postwar period. For southern Italians, regional ties became less important. Lawrence Squeri, phone interview by author, June 23, 2011.

“strictly American”—pancakes, eggs, sausage, and cereal.¹⁰⁵ Dinner might be a cut of roast beef. For Italian immigrants, the ability to purchase and eat meat was a symbol of American abundance, a luxury that they could rarely afford in Italy.¹⁰⁶ In Squeri’s words, for poor Italians, “the American dream was a big piece of American roast beef.”¹⁰⁷ Resort foods also began to show signs of cross-ethnic flavor. For the 1958 season, Pine Springs, an Italian American resort in Freehold, New York, promised guests that “Chinese food, sandwiches, and pizza-pies will be served in the Casino.”¹⁰⁸

Entertainment also reflected this Americanizing impulse. When asked if his nightclub performers were primarily Italian American, Val Fede, the owner of Acra Manor, said, “Not necessarily. We had like Lou Monte, who was an Italian entertainer, we had Jimmy Roselli, Connie Francis was an Italian entertainer. . . . They didn’t necessarily have to be Italian entertainers, so we booked anybody we could get, you know? That would draw [customers].”¹⁰⁹ One of Acra Manor’s more successful acts was Christine Jorgensen, who was famous for her sex reassignment surgery. Jorgensen was not the slightest bit Italian, and neither was her song and dance act, “Male Became Female.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Squeri, interview.

¹⁰⁶ *Hungering for America*, 56.

¹⁰⁷ Squeri, interview.

¹⁰⁸ “To Pine Springs Guests: Introducing Mike Garzilli and Family,” Resort Flyer, Greene County Resorts and Businesses Collection, Durham Center Museum Research Library, Durham, NY.

¹⁰⁹ Loretta and Val Fede, interview by author.

¹¹⁰ Loretta and Val Fede, interview.

Games and activities were also largely consistent from resort to resort, regardless of ethnicity. The *Brooklyn Eagle* occasionally published photographs of vacationers at resorts catering to white ethnics (primarily Italian, German, and Irish resorts) under headlines like “Boro Folk Forget About Work at Vacation Spots”, or “Brooklynites Flee the Heat to Play in Resorts.”¹¹¹ The photographs showed Italian vacationers partaking in many of the same outdoor activities as other ethnic groups. From resort to resort, vacationers played shuffleboard, horseshoes, golf, croquet, baseball, and tennis, and went swimming in local lakes or the resort pool [Figure 9].



Figure 9. Postcard from Pine Springs Resort in Freehold, New York. Postcards from the postwar decades are often strikingly similar, regardless of the ethnic or racial group a resort catered to. This one shows Italian American guests enjoy the resort pool. Source: Postcard by Les Bigham, Williston Park, New York.

¹¹¹ “Boro Folk Forget About Work at Vacation Spots,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 1, 1953; “Brooklynites Flee the Heat to Play in Resorts,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, July 29, 1954.

Despite the obvious Americanization of Italian resorts in the postwar period, the ethnic atmosphere of the resorts and vacationers' shared Italian roots remained constant. Interviewees with memories of the resorts in the 1940s and early 1950s indicated that even as Italian resorts modernized and Americanized, they still maintained some of what vacationers saw as their "Old World" character. Lawrence Squeri recalled that at the Villa Belvedere in Monroe, the owner's wife made homemade ravioli for their guests. Vacationers danced, listened to accordion music, and sang northern Italian folk songs, such as "Un Mazzolin di Fiore" ("A Little Bouquet of Flowers").¹¹² At the Villa Palermo, the Algozzines' New Jersey relatives performed Italian music for the guests in the evenings.¹¹³ Richard Gambino reminisced about learning to play bocce in the Catskills: "I can vividly recall the taste of the dry earth dust in the hot sun, the lightheadedness from sips of vinello, and the joy in skill imparted to me by the men who taught me the game."¹¹⁴ For immigrants, this social and cultural atmosphere of the resorts reminded them of the "old country"; for their children and grandchildren the resorts evoked memories of the "old neighborhood in the city."¹¹⁵ Yet the "Old World," "authentic" character that many vacationers observed at Italian resorts belied the continual invention and reinvention of Italian ethnic traditions.

¹¹² Squeri, interview.

¹¹³ Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 53.

¹¹⁴ *Blood of My Blood*, 151.

¹¹⁵ *Blood of My Blood*, 151.

Vacationers *did* eat foods considered to be “Italian” and “Italian American,” including veal parmesan and spaghetti and meatballs; however, these, too, were culinary hybrids. Food played an integral role in shaping an Italian American ethnic identity among immigrants’ children and grandchildren. Italian immigrants’ food choices were shaped by a variety of factors from the moment they settled in the United States. Although they brought their own regional culinary styles from Italy, they adapted these foodways to incorporate both other Italian regional styles and American foods (the latter often in response to their children’s demands).¹¹⁶ Italian American foods and culinary traditions grew out of an ongoing process of adapting and reinventing recipes passed from generation to generation. They incorporated new ingredients, new foods, and different ways of preparing and serving meals. The Italian foods served at resorts reflected this ongoing process. At home and in the Catskills, Italian food provided vacationers with a sense of continuity from and connection to the immigrant generation.

Vacationers’ emphasis on food, music, and games as expressions of Italianness suggests that Italians had internalized the dominant culture’s lessons about “acceptable” forms of ethnic expression in the postwar period. Vacationers drew upon these ethnic symbols to create a sense of shared identity. As ethnic enclaves in the city emptied out, and Italians increasingly dispersed to suburban areas outside of New York City, the children and grandchildren of immigrants “expressed their concerns about the present by remembering, or merely imagining,

¹¹⁶ Tracy N. Poe, “The Labor and Leisure of Food Production as a Mode of Ethnic Identity Building Among Italians in Chicago, 1890-1940,” *Rethinking History* 5, no. 1 (2001), 141-142.

a more comfortable past in the ethnic enclaves.”¹¹⁷ The continued popularity of Italian resorts reflected, in part, these many tensions in vacationers’ daily lives. Summer resorts provided a private space for the increasingly Americanized and dispersed children and grandchildren of Italian immigrants to create and sustain a sense of unified Italian “community” where one did not exist.

Italian resorts had different meanings and served different functions for vacationers, who expressed their “Italianness” in different ways. Augusta Marrapodi was born in Manhattan in 1959 and grew up in Seaford, Long Island. Her grandparents were Southern Italian immigrants who initially settled in the Italian immigrant enclave on Elizabeth Street in New York City; her parents grew up in the Bronx. Many of the men in her family worked at the Fulton Fish Market, and at the time of our interview in 2012 she noted, “they still do to this day.” Every summer from her childhood in the 1960s until the early 2000s, Marrapodi’s extended family vacationed at Pleasant Acres (formerly the Pleasant Rest House). Despite the fact that Pleasant Acres was an integral part of her family’s social life each summer, Marrapodi found it difficult to describe exactly what role “Italianness” played in resort life:

It’s a hard question. *When you’re so deep into it like I am, it’s hard to tell* [emphasis added]. I mean, they had so much pride in being Italian and it was so predominant there, like, everything was green and red and white . . . I think family would take the precedent over that . . . I don’t know if we would’ve went to a German place if we would’ve had the same feeling. . . . You know what? They would probably attack the kitchen and go make macaroni [laughs].¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ *We Are What We Eat*, 180.

¹¹⁸ Augusta Marrapodi, phone interview by author, January 21, 2012.

Marrapodi already felt very Italian in her everyday life. This feeling was structured in part by the presence of her close-knit extended family. The specifically “Italian” qualities of Pleasant Acres were not particularly striking to her. The ethnic symbols (the “red and green and white”) were less important than the space the resort provided for her dispersed family to reconnect every year. Yet the fact that she could not imagine vacationing anywhere else suggests the extent to which ethnicity continued to structure the social and cultural lives of many Italian Americans. For decades, well after her family members dispersed throughout the metropolitan area, they returned to the same resort every year with the same large group of Italian American family and friends.

For vacationers like Augusta Marrapodi, Italian resorts were a natural extension of the preexisting (if dispersed) Italian social communities in the New York metropolitan area. For others, vacationing at an Italian resort provided an opportunity to discover Italian American culture—in its post-World War II form—for the first time. Susan Farrugia’s family moved to Woodside, Queens in the early 1960s, when she was four years old. She grew up in a largely Irish neighborhood, and in contrast to Augusta Marrapodi, Farrugia described her upbringing as “totally American.” She recalled that her family’s yearly trips to Pleasant Acres were integral to her education in Italian American culture:

Through Pleasant Acres, I would know Italian songs ‘til today. Because the entertainment, your singers sang Italian songs. Your comedians would tell Italian jokes. . . . My mother was raised so freakin’ Italian it was crazy, okay? And yet when I was being raised, it was all American. . . . for me, I learned most of my Italian stuff *at Pleasant Acres!*¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Susan Farrugia, phone interview by author, January 30, 2012.

Historians researching the process of ethnicization have demonstrated that immigrant groups living in densely populated areas (like New York City) are more likely to engage actively in the “invention of ethnicity.”¹²⁰ In this case, the invention itself took place outside of the city, at summer resorts in the Catskills. Pleasant Acres provided a space for Farrugia to foster a sense of Italian identity in ways that she could not in her Queens neighborhood. A comparison of Farrugia’s and Marrapodi’s experiences at Pleasant Acres indicates what it meant to be and act Italian American could be quite different for vacationers, even among those staying at the same resort.

Many large groups of extended families and friends went to the same resorts year after year. Sometimes three or even four generations of particularly loyal families vacationed at the same resort. As Italian Americans increasingly moved out of ethnic enclaves in New York City and into the New York suburbs, resorts provided a space for these extended families to reunite every year. Susan Farrugia’s family began vacationing at Pleasant Acres in 1961, when she was four years old, based on a friend’s recommendation: “My father’s best friend told them how wonderful this place was. Plain and simple. They went to this resort, it was a blast, and they invited my parents to join them.” Farrugia’s family returned to the resort every year with the same group of people. By the mid-1960s, their “group” – originally six adults and eight children – expanded even further. Through word of mouth, “Each couple now had extended people coming,” for a total of approximately

¹²⁰ “The Invention of Ethnicity,” 14.

thirty to forty people.¹²¹ Farrugia noted that her family and friends were actually one of the smaller groups vacationing at Pleasant Acres. Augusta Marrapodi's parents met at Pleasant Acres in the 1940s, and she went to the resort nearly every year from her childhood in the 1960s until the resort closed in 2001. Marrapodi's "group" grew to include nearly 150 extended family members and friends who returned to Pleasant Acres every year during the last week of August.¹²²

Resorts served as a space for increasingly dispersed networks of family and friends to reconnect, and these yearly reunions were an integral part of resort life for generations of Italian American vacationers. In the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, many upwardly mobile Italian Americans moved out of the city's Italian enclaves and into Queens, Staten Island, Long Island, the Bronx, or other New York suburbs. As anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo has argued, "Our concepts of 'community' and 'close extended families' depend on geographic immobility; but community and family members are fundamentally workers who must follow capital's changing demand for labor."¹²³ As suburbanization and white flight increasingly dispersed Italian Americans throughout the New York metropolitan area, the resorts fostered a sense of a unified, stable Italian "community."

Vacationers also found a sense of security and freedom at the resorts. Far from their urban and suburban neighborhoods, parents felt comfortable letting their kids run loose. Interviewees who vacationed at Italian resorts as children described

¹²¹ Farrugia, interview.

¹²² Marrapodi, interview.

¹²³ Micaela di Leonardo, *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience: Kinship, Class, and Gender Among California Italian-Americans* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1984), 234.

the feeling of freedom that they felt there. Augusta Marrapodi emphasized that as a child, her favorite aspect of resort life was “The freedom. The freedom of like, ‘Goodbye mom! Goodbye dad!’ and just—that’s it. You didn’t have to see them all week.” Parents enjoyed a sense of freedom, too—“a parent doesn’t have to see the kids *all day* . . . everybody was there to look after you.”¹²⁴ Resortgoers and resort owners knew and trusted each other as family (whether or not they were literally so), and parents felt safe letting resort employees and other vacationers watch after their children.

Pleasant Acres, like most other Italian resorts in the Catskills, catered primarily to lower-middle-class and middle-class vacationers. Beyond advertising their Italian cooking, most Italian resorts did not openly proclaim their Italianness to the wider public. In part, this was because their Italian vacationers did not yet feel accepted by dominant society, and did not want to jeopardize their assimilation. The negotiation of what it meant to be “Italian American” took largely place in private, and was channeled through cultural expressions deemed acceptable to mainstream America—food, music, and games. Other Italians felt that the resorts’ “Italianness” was expressed primarily through the yearly tradition of families and friends gathering at summer resorts. For Italian Americans dispersed throughout urban and suburban areas, this act fostered a tremendous sense of community and continuity from the immigrant generation. On the surface, many of these Italian resorts *looked* very American; in many senses, they were.

¹²⁴ Marrapodi, interview.

In the early 1960s, Villaggio Italia, a high-end Italian resort in Haines Falls, took the opposite tack. The resort openly played up its specifically “ethnic” qualities while expressing them in ways that were permissible in American society. The Villaggio Italia was owned and operated by Aldo and Constance di Belardino from 1959 to 1970. Constance was the New York-born daughter of Italian immigrants, and her husband Aldo was from Rome, Italy. They married in Rome in 1939, and after World War II they moved to the United States with their two young sons, Mario and Philip. Aldo went into the wine importing business, and when one of the wineries offered to invest in a resort with him, he jumped at the opportunity. He purchased the Shady Grove resort in Haines Falls in 1959, renaming it the Villaggio Italia. As an Italian immigrant catering to the children and grandchildren of immigrants, Aldo “was big on introducing the Italians to their own culture.”¹²⁵ This showed in nearly every detail of the resort’s operation. The Villaggio Italia was bigger, more luxurious, and more modern than most Italian resorts in the Catskills. It also sought to be more “Italian.”

Like other Italian resort owners, the di Belardinos publicly expressed their resort’s ethnic identity through food, music, and games. They catered to wealthier Italian American guests, however, who were in more of a position to embrace their “Italianness” without worrying it might jeopardize their economic status. Vacationers enjoyed a constant stream of Italian imports at the Villaggio Italia, facilitated by the di Belardinos’ business and familial connections in Italy. Visitors could drink Italian wine and eat food cooked by Italian chefs, and Italian

¹²⁵ Philip di Belardino, phone interview by author, July 7, 2011.

entertainers and sports figures made occasional appearances at the resort. In 1961, the Italian light-heavyweight boxing champion Giulio Rinaldi trained for an upcoming fight at the resort, and in 1967 Nino Benvenuti trained there for his middleweight title match.¹²⁶ In 1968 guests were treated to repeated performances by Italian singer Luciano Virgili, who performed at the resort for the entire season.¹²⁷ According to the di Belardinos' son Philip, his parents sought to reconnect their guests with their Italian heritage, "to let people know where they come from and be proud."¹²⁸ The di Belardinos perceived that not only did their guests have limited knowledge about Italy, but they were also uncomfortable with fully embracing their Italian heritage in a society that had long ridiculed and condemned it.

The di Belardinos went to great lengths to evoke the atmosphere of the Italian homeland—visually and experientially—at their resort. They freely borrowed from a mix of Italian regions, customs, and time periods. Resort visitors could enjoy a Venetian gondola ride on the pond, swim in the shadow of Roman columns, and relax in the Fontana di Trevi lounge.¹²⁹ A *New York Times* reporter visiting the Villaggio Italia recalled that "a group of strolling musicians sing 'O Sole Mio' in the Stella Alpina lounge in the morning, the waiters and busboys appear at

¹²⁶ "Rinaldi Has Passion for Work, Food: Canneloni, Lasagna, Manicotti; You Think Archie Has Trouble!" *Boston Globe*, June 6, 1961; "Benvenuti Would Rather Be Fightin' Than Feudin,'" *Herald Statesman*, April 7, 1967.

¹²⁷ "Music and Arts," *Herald Statesman*, October 2, 1968.

¹²⁸ di Belardino, interview.

¹²⁹ "Atmosphere In Catskills Is Global," *New York Times*, May 7, 1967; "Catskills Vacation Resorts Draw Many Ethnic Groups," *New York Times*, August 7, 1969.

poolside each Wednesday afternoon dressed as Roman slaves and carrying pork, turkeys and loaves of bread for 'la Festa Romana,' and Lou Monte sings in the evening of his Italian mother, amid applause and tears."¹³⁰ All of the gardens, pathways, and buildings on the grounds were named after famous Italian people and places.

Some of these Italian references were unknown to the Villaggio Italia's guests. Aldo di Belardino used these opportunities to teach them about Italian society and culture. According to his son Philip, he was always "educating as well as entertaining."¹³¹ Like other wealthy Italians, di Belardino sought to shape expressions of Italian American ethnic identity and "fashion a more positive image by focusing on the glories of Old-Country high culture."¹³² Di Belardino attempted to redefine what it meant to be "Italian American" and make it compatible with white middle-class values. His educational efforts also underscore a class rift between Italian Americans; upwardly mobile Italian Americans often showed disdain toward the cultural expressions of working- and lower-middle-class Italian Americans, which they perceived as coarse and "lowbrow."¹³³ The di Belardinos' variant of Italian ethnicity, savored by their affluent guests, was profoundly shaped by their privileged position within the American economy.¹³⁴ They were able to

¹³⁰ "Catskills Vacation Resorts Draw Many Ethnic Groups," *New York Times*, August 7, 1969.

¹³¹ di Belardino, interview.

¹³² "The Invention of Ethnicity," 29.

¹³³ Joseph Sciorra, "Introduction: Listening with an Accent," in Joseph Sciorra, ed., *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives* (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2011), 1-10.

¹³⁴ *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience*, 120.

proclaim this identity by focusing on cultural expressions that were acceptable to the dominant society, and because their guests were already financially secure. The stakes were much lower for affluent Italian Americans.

The Villaggio Italia catered primarily to Italian Americans whose notions of Italy were very different—more disconnected and romanticized—than those of the immigrant generation. The resort attracted visitors with the promise of an “authentic” Italian experience. But these efforts occasionally created some conflict over what authenticity looked like.¹³⁵ Many guests were upset by the Italian chefs’ northern Italian cuisine. Expecting veal parmesan and lasagna, they received spaghetti with pesto and risotto instead. Philip di Belardino recalled, “I’ll never forget the comments. I mean, they were devastating. They were making it seem like we weren’t Italian. . . . ‘Where’s the red sauce, where’s my lasagna, where’s this, where’s that?’”¹³⁶ Seeking authenticity was a futile exercise; the migration experience inherently altered Italian cultural forms and traditions, including foodways. As anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo has argued, “The idea that immigrants recreated the behavior and traditions of their original villages and towns in the New World . . . is simply false.”¹³⁷ The guests’ complaints reinforce this point. They developed their own Italian American foods, customs, and traditions in the United States, and their idea of what was “authentically” Italian did not necessarily match that of the di Belardinos. And even if it did, many of them

¹³⁵ Steven D. Hoelscher, *Heritage on Stage: The Invention of Ethnic Place in America’s Little Switzerland* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 220.

¹³⁶ di Belardino, interview.

¹³⁷ *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience*, 134.

preferred their hybrid, Americanized version. The conflict brilliantly illustrates the extent to which Italian American identity was an ongoing, often messy, negotiation.

In many ways, the Villaggio Italia was not typical of Italian resorts in the Catskills in the 1960s and 1970s. It catered to a wealthier clientele, and it offered a more obviously “Italian” experience. Indeed, the di Belardinos’ efforts to bring in Italian imports ensured that their resort actually sustained more direct ties to Italy than most Italian resorts. The impulses it embodied, however, were evident at Italian resorts throughout the Catskills. Above all, Italian Americans sought to create a sense of Italian American community and identity in an escapist, recreational atmosphere.

To vacationers, the resorts seemed never to change. When asked how Pleasant Acres changed over time, Augusta Marrapodi insisted that it didn’t: “Not at all. Not in my lifetime. My mother said there wasn’t all those cabins there when she was younger. . . . She saw that change, but I’m telling you nothing changed. What could’ve possibly changed? Nothing. I can’t even tell you one thing that changed.”¹³⁸ Resort owners remembered it much differently. Loretta Fede noted that when guests arrive at Acra Manor each year, most “know all about the place, they know what to expect. You just tell them what’s new. But you always have to have something new, otherwise they get bored.”¹³⁹ The sense of timelessness was due, at

¹³⁸ Marrapodi, interview.

¹³⁹ Loretta and Val Fede, interview.

least in part, to the reality that most resorts were family businesses operating on shoestring budgets. Many could not afford anything *but* slow, incremental change.

The appearance of timelessness, like ethnic identity itself, was comforting to guests. Both were integral to the resorts' appeal by projecting continuity in the face of constant reinvention and upheaval. Ethnic identity remained salient for Italian Americans in the postwar decades, but they were also beginning to Americanize and disperse throughout the New York metropolitan area. In the 1960s and 70s the sense of familiarity at resorts took on added significance, as Italians and other white ethnics still living in the city grew increasingly frustrated and alarmed at demographic changes in their neighborhoods.¹⁴⁰ Italian resorts bolstered the sense that there was a unified, unchanging Italian American community in New York. As we will see in the following chapters, the reality was much more complex.

"Just Like Puerto Rico": Puerto Rican Resorts

In the 1940s and 1950s, Puerto Ricans became the newest wave of migrants to New York City to discover the Catskills resort area. Puerto Rican migration to the United States increased dramatically after World War II, and this growth coincided with the increased affordability and accessibility of travel to summer resorts. Boarding houses established by Spanish immigrants in the 1920s and 1930s began changing hands in the wake of the Spanish Civil War and World War II. As the Spanish *colonia* in New York City declined, and Puerto Rican migrants moved in

¹⁴⁰ These changes will be discussed in-depth in chapters 3 and 4. See also *White Ethnic New York*, 147 and 155.

greater numbers to New York City, many Spanish resorts began catering to growing numbers of Puerto Ricans [Figure 10]. Before long, Puerto Ricans were buying up many of the old Spanish boarding houses and establishing their own. Vacationers were enticed to the resorts, known collectively as Las Villas, by reasonable rates, the “exquisite Spanish and Creole food,” nonstop music and dancing, and a chance to enjoy the fresh air and relaxing environment of the Catskill Mountains, which reminded many visitors of “home.”¹⁴¹ By the 1960s, there were more than two-dozen Spanish and Puerto Rican resorts in the area; most were clustered in the small hamlet of Plattekill. The history of Las Villas is intimately bound up in the postwar history of Puerto Rican migration to New York City, from the migration experience and migrants’ longing for Puerto Rico, to the dislocation of urban renewal and disinvestment in inner-city neighborhoods.

¹⁴¹ “Puerto Ricans Go to the Catskills,” *New York Times*, August 7, 1965. Advertisements for Las Villas in the Spanish-language newspaper, *La Prensa*, emphasized the availability of Spanish and Creole food, swimming, music acts, and reasonable rates. For an example, see *La Prensa*, 18 August 1960.



**Figure 10. Postcard image of Villa Victoria resort, in Plattekill, New York.
Source: Gale-Scott, Poughkeepsie, New York.**

Puerto Rico became an “unincorporated territory” of the United States following the defeat of Spain in the Spanish-American War of 1898. Although American politicians long denied it, this was the beginning of a new colonial relationship.¹⁴² The United States began industrializing the island’s once-diversified agricultural sector to focus on the production and export of sugar, and Puerto Ricans served as cheap labor on both the island and increasingly, the mainland. The Jones Act, signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson in 1917, granted Puerto Ricans United States citizenship; however, Congress passed the law without acknowledging the political will of the Puerto Rican people themselves.¹⁴³ Many Puerto Ricans

¹⁴² *Puerto Rican Citizen: History and Political Identity in Twentieth-Century New York City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1-3.

¹⁴³ Nicholas De Genova and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *Latino Crossings: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and the Politics of Race and Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 7.

rightly saw the move as an effort to bring the island more firmly under American imperialist control in the guise of democracy.¹⁴⁴

By making Puerto Ricans citizens of the United States, the Jones Act facilitated their ability to move freely between the island and mainland. Although Puerto Ricans had been settling in New York City since the late nineteenth century, their population began to grow noticeably during World War I. European immigration came to a halt during the war, and Puerto Ricans were recruited to take their places as factory laborers in the city. The Puerto Rican community continued to grow in the 1920s and 1930s, as American corporations reorganized Puerto Rico's agricultural sector around the sugar industry. The shift caused economic stagnation and unemployment on the island, and prompted many Puerto Ricans to move to the mainland—specifically, New York City.¹⁴⁵

In the wake of decolonization efforts around the globe after World War II, the United States' colonial relationship with Puerto Rico became a political liability.¹⁴⁶ In 1947, Congress gave Puerto Ricans the right to elect their own governor, and in 1952, approved a Constitution making the island as a “commonwealth” and “Free Associated State” of the United States. While these changes gave the appearance of Puerto Rican self-government, they came with a host of strings attached that, in effect, allowed the U.S. Congress to void the Constitution at will and veto any laws passed by the Puerto Rican legislature.¹⁴⁷ At the same time, the economic ties

¹⁴⁴ *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 6.

¹⁴⁵ *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 30.

¹⁴⁶ *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 135.

¹⁴⁷ *Latino Crossings*, 8-9.

between the island and mainland became even more firmly linked. Beginning in 1947, the U.S. government promoted Operation Bootstrap, a plan to modernize and industrialize the island through private corporate investment. The plan succeeded in using tax incentives to draw mostly American corporate investment, but also caused tremendous unemployment on the island. The number of Puerto Rican labor migrants to the mainland increased dramatically after World War II, pushed by shrinking economic opportunities and poverty in Puerto Rico, and drawn by the booming postwar economy and demand for industrial labor on the mainland.¹⁴⁸ Whereas earlier Puerto Rican migrants were predominantly urban, skilled or semiskilled laborers, postwar migrants were mostly unskilled and poor. The large-scale migration of working-class Puerto Ricans was further facilitated by affordable flights, or *guagua aérea*.¹⁴⁹ The vast majority of these postwar Puerto Rican migrants settled in New York City; in addition to settling in East Harlem and Brooklyn, a large proportion settled in the South Bronx.¹⁵⁰

Many Puerto Rican resort owners first visited Plattekill as guests at Spanish boarding houses. This was not unusual. Spanish immigrants moved to New York in large numbers between 1880 and 1930; when Spain lost its colonies in Cuba and Puerto Rico in the late nineteenth century, many Spaniards living in the colonies reimmigrated to the United States. They were followed by another wave of

¹⁴⁸ Clara E. Rodriguez, *Puerto Ricans: Born in the U.S.A.* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 11-12. *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 141.

¹⁴⁹ Laura Briggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 166.

¹⁵⁰ Roberta L. Singer and Elena Martinez, "A South Bronx Latin Music Tale," *CENTRO Journal* XVI, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 179.

Spaniards who came directly to the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵¹ When Puerto Rican migrants began settling in New York City during World War I, they settled in the *colonia hispana*, or Spanish-speaking neighborhoods in Manhattan and Brooklyn composed largely of Spanish, Cuban, and other Latin American immigrants. Collectively, they created a “remarkable Hispanic cultural effervescence” in New York City in the early twentieth century.¹⁵² When immigration restriction in the 1920s brought Spanish immigration to a halt, Spanish entrepreneurs in New York City increasingly catered to the city’s growing Puerto Rican population. Puerto Ricans helped sustain their businesses in the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁵³ The same pattern was repeated at Las Villas in Plattekill. As Historian Lorrin Thomas has noted, in the early years of Puerto Rican settlement in New York, “Spanish origins conferred greater social status,” and many Puerto Ricans tried to “pass” as Spanish.¹⁵⁴ There was prestige, too, bound up in vacationing at a Spanish resort.

Lydia Malave, the Puerto Rican owner of the Villa Mina de Oro, first visited the Catskills as a vacationer. She was working in Miami and planning to move to New York, when her employer (“a very good Spanish lady”) suggested that she take a brief break from work: “she said, ‘No way, you’ve worked too much and you deserve to go at least one week to the countryside. I’m going to send you to Casa

¹⁵¹ “The Discovery of Spain in New York, circa 1930,” 220-221.

¹⁵² James D. Fernández, “The Discovery of Spain in New York, circa 1930,” in Edward Sullivan, ed., *Nueva York: 1613-1945* (New York: New-York Historical Society, Scala, 2010), 225.

¹⁵³ “The Discovery of Spain in New York, circa 1930,” 230.

¹⁵⁴ *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 26-27.

Rodriguez where I always go.” Malave described her rapid transition from patron to proprietor: “I went there for a week and I brought my sister-in-law with her kids. . . . I saw a sign that said “For Sale” . . . I went to the lady and I bought it.” Other family members followed Malave: “Soon after my sister-in-law decided to buy too and built her villa.” The villas shifted rapidly from Spanish to Puerto Rican ownership. Malave noted, “Originally the people here were Spanish, I think I was the first Puerto Rican up here, and everyone came after me. It was so cheap that many bought land and settled, now its been developed everywhere.”¹⁵⁵

Pedro Guardarramas, owner of the Villa Guardarramas, recounted a similar narrative. Born and raised in Puerto Rico, Guardarramas moved to the United States and established a restaurant in the Bronx in the 1940s. During the summer, Garcia frequented the Spanish-owned Villa Garcia. He and his family members eagerly looked forward to their summer trips upstate: “I loved the country, I grew up in the country, and so did my family.” Guardarramas recounted that in 1957, “my daughters begged me to buy a house because they loved the country so much and I thought it was better for them to be there. . . . one day someone took me to Villa Rodriguez and Mrs. Rodriguez talked me into buying it. So I did.”¹⁵⁶ As a growing number of Spanish resort owners sought to sell their properties, there were a number of Puerto Ricans like Malave and Guardarramas ready to purchase them.

¹⁵⁵ Lydia and Luis Malave, interview with Juana Camacho, September 27, 1991. From “The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills” exhibit, Folklore Archive, DCHA.

¹⁵⁶ Pedro Guardarramas, interview with Juana Camacho, September 30, 1991. From “The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills” exhibit, Folklore Archive, DCHA.

Malave and Guardarramas first ventured to the Catskills seeking a “rest” from work and city life, but they discovered a market for Puerto Rican-owned resorts catering to other Puerto Ricans. They decided to settle in Plattekill, open their own villas, and invite more Puerto Rican vacationers from New York City. Bit by bit, the Spanish-owned villas were bought up and replaced by Puerto Rican-owned villas. Because many of these properties were already functioning as boarding houses and resorts, there was already an established infrastructure and clientele for them to build on. This undoubtedly eased the transition for the new owners. By the 1960s and 70s, most of Las Villas catered primarily to Puerto Ricans.¹⁵⁷

Two resorts, the Spanish-owned Villa Nueva, and the Puerto Rican-owned Sunny Acres Hotel, were considered to be higher-class resorts. One interviewee emphasized that the owners of Villa Nueva “were very concerned as to who their clientele was. They were very concerned.” Many villas did not have a dress code and allowed anyone in. Not so at Villa Nueva: “if you were going to Villa Nueva, you *dressed* for the evening.”¹⁵⁸ Sunny Acres also had a reputation as “a very high class place, with a strict dress code.”¹⁵⁹ The Puerto Rican resorts stood out, however, for the extent to which they catered to working-class vacationers. Beginning in the late 1950s, charter buses, known as *guaguas*, greatly facilitated working-class

¹⁵⁷ This “tradition of ethnic succession” was very common in the long history of hotels, boarding houses, and resorts in the Catskill Mountains. “Going to the Mountains: A Social History,” 93.

¹⁵⁸ Anonymous Plattekill resident, interview.

¹⁵⁹ Interview notes, Victor Serrano interview with Mary Zwolinski, September 15, 1990, “The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills” exhibit, DCHA.

vacationers' access to Las Villas from New York City.¹⁶⁰ Travel companies in New York City arranged the *guaguas*, charging vacationers a flat rate for a round-trip bus ticket to one of the resorts, a meal, and use of the resort grounds for the day. A 1965 *New York Times* article about Las Villas stated that the round trip price for a bus trip at \$7.50 for an adult and \$5.00 for a child.¹⁶¹ The article also quoted resort owner Pedro Guardarramas, who observed, "I don't try to make money off these people. They are mostly so very poor. But look, they are having a good time, and that's what counts."¹⁶² *Guaguas* offered a mutually beneficial arrangement for resort owners, travel agencies, musicians, and working-class Puerto Ricans in the city. The agencies in New York City took care of payment and transportation, sometimes even hiring musicians to play at the resort. In turn, the villas received busloads of paying customers each weekend, and visitors enjoyed a quick trip to the mountains for a reasonable price.

Las Villas exhibited a fluid mix of cultural influences in the postwar decades. In part, this was a result of the transition from Spanish to Puerto Rican resort ownership and patronage. For example, the Spanish-owned Villa Nueva resort, remained in business by catering to both Spaniards and Puerto Ricans. The resort drew an increasingly affluent Puerto Rican clientele, despite the resort's continued

¹⁶⁰ Stradling notes that the Catskills received an added boost in popularity among working-class vacationers thanks to Robert Moses' construction of low bridges that obstructed bus tours to Long Island's beaches and recreational areas; *Making Mountains*, 193.

¹⁶¹ "Puerto Ricans go to the Catskills."

¹⁶² "Puerto Ricans go to the Catskills."

emphasis on its “charming Spanish Atmosphere.”¹⁶³ The Los Tres Argentinos resort provides another example of this cultural diversity. A 1971 *New York Times* article quoted the resort’s Spanish owner, Henry Cluny: “Most of my customers now are Puerto Ricans,” he said. “I took this place over 20 years ago from two Argentines when their partner, the third Argentine, passed away. Now I specialize in Caribbean dishes.”¹⁶⁴ Thus a Spaniard purchased the Los Tres Argentinos villa, originally under Argentinean ownership, for a Spanish clientele. When Puerto Ricans became his primary customers, Henry Cluny chose to cater (literally) to Puerto Rican tastes by cooking Caribbean foods—all the while retaining the Argentinean name of the resort.

Much like the changes underway at African American and Italian resorts, the shift from Spanish to Puerto Rican resorts in the postwar period represented a shift away from the quieter, rural, farm-life qualities of earlier boarding houses. Resort owners and vacationers focused instead on music, dancing, drinking, and socializing. Pedro Guardarramas described the shift from Spanish to Puerto Rican ownership and clientele:

[The Spanish villas were] very quiet. People came for the entire summer to rest, escape the heat and humidity of the city, and it was also safer for the children. There was very little music at that time, there were however some recreational activities like table games (cards, dominos, chess, etc.) and outdoor ones like shoe-horses and Petanca . . . All these games were new to us, what Puerto Ricans did the most was to dance. When we started to come up here everything changed. . . . With the large numbers of Puerto Ricans and Latinos

¹⁶³ Villa Nueva advertisement, *The Evening News* (Newburgh, NY), August 13, 1965.

¹⁶⁴ “Villa Hopping in the ‘Puerto Rican Alps.’”

coming there was more dancing, more drinking, and better business.¹⁶⁵

Puerto Rican resort owners and vacationers stressed that this transformation reflected Puerto Rican musical and culinary preferences. Gladys Figueroa, owner of Villa Campoalegre, summed up the attraction: “The central activities here have always been music, dance and food.”¹⁶⁶

Puerto Rican resorts, like their Italian counterparts, served as important sites for vacationers to continually create and express new cultural and ethnic identities. Although many vacationers saw the resorts as places to celebrate their “Puerto Ricanness,” the meanings of that identity were fluid. Puerto Rican New Yorkers expressed cultural identities that were shaped by their race, class, migration experience, and status as both American citizens and colonial subjects. Puerto Ricans did not bring a pure, traditional culture with them from the island to the mainland; indeed, one “authentic” Puerto Rican culture does not exist. Ethnic cultural expressions like music and food are constantly being recreated and reshaped, along with ethnicity itself.¹⁶⁷

Music was integral to Puerto Rican resorts. Latin bands started playing in the early afternoon, “filling the dance halls and the surrounding hills with merengues, cha-chas and rumbas.” After a short break for dinner, the bands returned and

¹⁶⁵ Guardarramas, interview.

¹⁶⁶ Gladys and Andres Figueroa interview, September 27, 1991. “The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills” exhibit, Folklore Archive, DCHA.

¹⁶⁷ Ruth Glasser, *My Music is My Flag: Puerto Rican Musicians and Their New York Communities, 1917-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 6-7

played until the nightclubs closed at 3 a.m.¹⁶⁸ Here, too, diverse cultural influences were evident. A number of Puerto Rican musicians performed at the resorts, including *jibaro* musician Ramito, Puerto Rican percussionist Ray Barretto, Boogaloo musician Pete Rodriguez, and salsa music orchestra El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico. Yet Las Villas also featured many other Spanish-speaking musicians who performed a variety of Caribbean, Latin American, and Spanish music styles, including Afro-Cuban Jazz musician Machito, Spanish singer Juan Legido, and many different multi-ethnic and multi-racial “Latin” bands from the city. Puerto Rican musicians living in New York City drew not only upon their own island musical influences, but also the rhythms, beats, and musical styles of Cubans, African Americans, and others.¹⁶⁹ African American and Latino jazz musicians began forging musical partnerships in New York City the 1930s and 1940s.¹⁷⁰ In the 1950s and 1960s, Puerto Rican youths in New York City expressed diverse musical interests that included “mambo, Motown, and salsa mania,” and they “developed multiethnic consciousness that acknowledged their African heritage rather than denying it, as many of their parents did.”¹⁷¹ All of these influences contributed to the

¹⁶⁸ “Puerto Ricans go to the Catskills.”

¹⁶⁹ *My Music is My Flag*, 6-7; Frederick Douglass Opie, “Eating, Dancing, and Courting in New York: Black and Latino Relations, 1930-1970,” *Journal of Social History* 42, no. 1 (Fall 2008), 80.

¹⁷⁰ In the 1930s African American trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie learned to play Afro-Cuban music with Cuban musicians including Mario Bauzá and Alberto Socarras. In 1940, Bauzá formed Machito and the Afro-Cubans, a band that included African American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban musicians. “Eating, Dancing, and Courting in New York,” 82-84.

¹⁷¹ “Eating, Dancing, and Courting in New York,” 95.

development to a “New York Latin music sound,” that flowed back and forth between New York City to Las Villas every summer.¹⁷²

Guests also came to Las Villas for the home-cooked food. Much like at Italian American resorts, Puerto Rican foodways provoked tremendous comfort and nostalgia in vacationers. Resort owners did not have access to Spanish and Caribbean foods in Plattekill, so they hired merchants from New York City to truck up plantains and other foods to serve guests.¹⁷³ Resort owners prided themselves on their home cooking—roast pork, arroz con gandules (rice with pigeon peas), guineos (boiled green bananas), tostones (fried plantains) among other Puerto Rican specialties. In 1967, the Villa El Nilo was roasting “a ton of pigs a week . . . outside in five electric barbecue ovens.”¹⁷⁴ Resort owners lured guests in with the smell of roast pork cooking outside.

The surging popularity of Las Villas in the 1950s and 1960s was profoundly shaped by Puerto Ricans’ day-to-day lives in New York City. When the newest wave of Puerto Rican migrants began arriving in New York City after World War II, their presence prompted outbursts of handwringing and fear-mongering by New York journalists, who emphasized the migrants’ poverty and perceived welfare dependency.¹⁷⁵ A decade later, the media started to offer more sympathetic and optimistic accounts of Puerto Ricans in New York City, but stubborn stereotypes

¹⁷² “A South Bronx Latin Music Tale,” 183.

¹⁷³ Wilfrido Castillo, Jr., interview by author, Plattekill, NY, December 13, 2013.

¹⁷⁴ “In New York’s Spanish Alps, Roast Pig Alfresco Tops the Menu,” *New York Times*, July 6, 1967.

¹⁷⁵ *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 141-142, 154.

about their poverty and welfare reliance remained.¹⁷⁶ Beginning in the late 1950s, these stereotypes were compounded by both popular culture and the vast output of social scientific studies that reinforced perceptions of Puerto Ricans as violent, dangerous troublemakers, with poor family structures and weak morals.¹⁷⁷ Public perceptions of Puerto Ricans were increasingly detached from the reality that American imperialism, with its attendant corporate interests, drove Puerto Rican migration. They also ignored the fact that migrants' lives were being upended by deindustrialization, employment and housing discrimination, and urban renewal in New York City.

Beginning in the 1950s, a number of urban renewal projects devastated Puerto Rican communities in New York City. In 1959, a neighborhood on the West Side of Manhattan was demolished to build the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, displacing more than six thousand residents. The majority of these residents were Puerto Rican.¹⁷⁸ The demolition of their neighborhoods and relocation to new areas of the city meant that they lost places that were socially and culturally significant to their everyday lives, from churches and theaters, to restaurants and social clubs.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 158.

¹⁷⁷ See the discussions of *West Side Story* (which premiered on Broadway in 1957) by Laura Briggs in *Reproducing Empire*, 172-174, and by Lorrin Thomas in *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 162-164. Briggs and Thomas also discuss the impact of social scientific studies; see *Puerto Rican Citizen*, Chapter Five, "How to Study the Postwar Migrant: Social Science, Puerto Ricans, and Social Problems," and *Reproducing Empire*, Chapter 6, "'I Like to be in America': Postwar Puerto Rican Migration, the Culture of Poverty, and the Moynihan Report."

¹⁷⁸ *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 193.

¹⁷⁹ "Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios," 98.

These conditions fostered Puerto Ricans' intense sense of displacement in New York City. Author Piri Thomas was born in 1928, the dark-skinned, American-born son of a Puerto Rican mother and Cuban father. In his 1967 memoir about growing up in New York City, *Down These Means Streets*, Thomas recounted his family's move onto a predominantly Italian block in Harlem. Soon after moving into the new neighborhood, Thomas was accosted by a group of Italian boys demanding to know his ethnicity:

'Hey, you,' he said. 'What nationality are ya?'

I looked at him and wondered which nationality to pick. And one of his friends said, 'Ah, Rocky, he's black enuff to be a nigger. Ain't that what you is, kid?'

My voice was almost shy in its anger. 'I'm Puerto Rican,' I said. 'I was born here.' I wanted to shout it, but it came out like a whisper.¹⁸⁰

Despite being born in the United States, the combination of Thomas's dark skin color and perceived foreignness prevented him from identifying and being identified as an "all-American boy" like the protagonist of his beloved childhood radio program, "Jack Armstrong, the All-American boy."¹⁸¹ Thomas, like many other Puerto Ricans, existed in an in-between state. He was dark-skinned, but not African American; an American citizen, but seemingly "foreign"; Puerto Rican, but born in New York. He was never fully accepted as American but also detached—literally and figuratively—from Puerto Rico itself.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Piri Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets* (1967; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 24.

¹⁸¹ *Down These Mean Streets*, 12.

¹⁸² *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 3.

Thomas's story is important here for two reasons. First, it depicts the desperate and often violent ways in which Italians claimed their own whiteness by marking racial boundaries between themselves and their African American and Puerto Rican neighbors.¹⁸³ Italians sought to shore up their own fragile location in the American racial order by erecting and violently enforcing these racial boundaries. As historian Robert Orsi has argued, Italians "became 'Italian American' on this turbulent and shifting terrain."¹⁸⁴

Thomas's story also reflects the painful impact of racism on Puerto Ricans. Like Thomas, many Puerto Ricans experienced considerable discrimination in New York City, whether they were born on the island or the United States mainland. Sociologist and ethnic studies scholar Ramón Grosfoguel argues, "Discrimination reinforces a feeling of belonging to, and an idealization of, the imagined place of origin."¹⁸⁵ Unlike Italian Americans, Puerto Ricans did not accept a hyphenated identity as "Puerto Rican-Americans" because they did not feel accepted by white American society.¹⁸⁶ The impact of deindustrialization, increased unemployment, and disinvestment in Puerto Rican neighborhoods in New York City in the postwar period only compounded these feelings. Puerto Ricans living in New York City found little reason to celebrate their American citizenship. Instead, most identified as Puerto Ricans first and idealized their Puerto Rican origins. Many longed to

¹⁸³ "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People," 337-338; *Living the Revolution*, 237-238.

¹⁸⁴ "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People," 318.

¹⁸⁵ *Colonial Subjects*, 141.

¹⁸⁶ These feelings of in-betweenness were further fostered by the ease of movement between Puerto Rico and the United States, and the constant comings and goings of their fellow Puerto Ricans. *Colonial Subjects*, 141.

return permanently to the island. Amidst rampant discrimination and the destruction of their physical living spaces in New York City, Las Villas played an essential role for Puerto Rican New Yorkers, providing a “place to displaced people.”¹⁸⁷

In light of the displacement many Puerto Ricans experienced in New York City, some sought to make Plattekill their permanent home. The area became so popular that many Puerto Ricans vacationers ended up settling in the town. Some, like Pedro Guardarramas and Lydia Malave, opened their own resorts. Others purchased homes and found other employment in the area, creating a year-round Spanish-speaking community. Wilfrido (“Willie”) Castillo, Jr.’s parents, Wilfrido and Delia Castillo, first visited a Spanish resort in Plattekill, Villa Galicia, for their honeymoon in 1950. Wilfrido Castillo, Jr. was born in 1952. His family lived in the Bronx, and they continued to vacation in Plattekill every summer. They liked it so much that in 1959, they decided to move to there. Wilfrido Castillo, Sr. worked as a plumber and eventually, a constable on the town police force. Delia Castillo did piecework at a local garment factory. They were enticed by Plattekill’s growing Spanish-speaking community, the tremendous openness of the rural landscape, and the increased living space. Everyone could have their own bedroom, which was

¹⁸⁷ In his article “Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios: Preserving Contemporary Urban Landscapes,” Luis Aponte-Parés focuses on the creation of *casitas*—literally “little houses”—in New York City, which are small, illegally built balloon-frame structures that serve as meeting places for a variety of community functions—political organizing, dinners, birthday parties, and musical performances, among others. His description of the function that *casitas* serve in the lives of Puerto Rican New Yorkers informs my reading of the significance of Las Villas. “Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios,” 99.

impossible for their family in the Bronx. Like Augusta Marrapodi, Willie Castillo, Jr.'s early memories of Plattekill offered a stark contrast between the confining qualities of urban life in New York City, and the freedom of the countryside: "When you're going back to the city, you're going back to the concrete jungle. And now, all of a sudden [in Plattekill], they had their freedom. I was up here and my parents, my father and mother worked so hard just to make sure in the summer time we could enjoy ourselves." For the working-class Castillo family, the ability to settle in Plattekill was a sign of their upward mobility and aspirations for a middle-class life; it was, Castillo said, the Puerto Rican version of suburbanization—"the Puerto Rican Long Island."¹⁸⁸

Vacationers, by contrast, likened Plattekill to Puerto Rico. A vacationer told a *New York Times* reporter, "Las Villas reminds me of Puerto Rico with its easygoing life, friendly people and good treatment."¹⁸⁹ Six years later, another visitor expressed an almost identical sentiment: "The *ambiente* here is more friendly [than at the beach], more typical, just like Puerto Rico."¹⁹⁰ Ismael Martinez, the Puerto Rican owner of the Sunny Acres Hotel-Motel in Plattekill offered up the resorts, and Plattekill itself, as acceptable, even desirable alternatives to return migration: "Why do we have to go back to Puerto Rico when we have the island right here in the

¹⁸⁸ Wilfrido Castillo, Jr., interview by author, Plattekill, NY, December 13, 2013.

¹⁸⁹ "Puerto Ricans go to the Catskills."

¹⁹⁰ "Villa Hopping in the 'Puerto Rican Alps.'"

Spanish Alps?”¹⁹¹ Plattekill was much closer, much more affordable, and more fleeting than returning permanently to the island.

If Puerto Ricans could not return to Puerto Rico, they could do the next best thing: create their own ideal Puerto Rican community in the Catskills. Las Villas offered a reasonably priced “escape” to the mountains, where fresh air, music, dancing, and home-cooked food was in no short supply. They also offered vacationers a space where Puerto Ricans could celebrate and create a sense of cultural unity and identity in the midst of an urban community crisis. The resorts provided Puerto Ricans with an antidote, however fleeting, from the feelings of alienation, displacement, and never quite being “at home” in New York City.¹⁹²

Conclusion

Italian, African American, and Puerto Rican vacationers all emphasized feeling like they were among family and old friends at the resorts. Many were repeat customers who developed close friendships not only with other vacationers, but also with the resort owners. A humorous exchange with Val and Loretta Fede, the owners of Acra Manor, perfectly sums up the sentiments of many vacationers in the Catskills, regardless of race or ethnicity:

Loretta Fede: We’ve been there so many years, they may not show up for fifteen or eighteen years, and they’ll come in the door and go, ‘Remember him?’ I mean he was like six years old, now he’s like twenty! And she’ll go, ‘That’s Joey! Remember Joey?’ They think that you know all of them personally, you know? Which you do know

¹⁹¹ “Puerto Ricans go to the Catskills.”

¹⁹² Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 53.

them—[but] fifteen years later, he looks a little bit different. . . . It's a very personal touch.

Val Fede: And then of course we say 'Oh! Of course! That's little Joey!¹⁹³

African American vacationer James Churchman echoed this sentiment. He recalled that he came to know Paradise Farm owner Sally Walker so well that "if I didn't have a second or third helping, she'd come out wanting to know what was wrong with me."¹⁹⁴ By providing vacationers with a sense of comfort, familiarity, and continuity, resort owners ensured that many staunchly loyal guests would return to their establishments year after year.

Ironically, vacationers described feeling at home at resorts that were far from their actual residences, in a landscape where most had no literal family roots. Puerto Rican vacationers compared Plattekill to the rolling hills of Puerto Rico, and the resorts' ambiance to the island's friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Second- and third-generation Italian Americans likened their resorts to the areas of first settlement in New York City, the old Italian enclaves established by the immigrant generation. For African Americans, the resorts' distance from their urban neighborhoods helped foster a sense of community and family among the black middle class. In the postwar period summer resorts became idealized spaces where vacationers could unselfconsciously foster a sense of group identity while physically and mentally at a distance from the realities of their everyday lives.

But the differences between the experiences of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Italian Americans are as striking as the similarities. In the 1940s and

¹⁹³ Loretta and Val Fede, interview.

¹⁹⁴ James E. Churchman, Jr., interview.

50s, resort vacations remained accessible primarily to more prosperous African Americans. Summer resorts were a space for fostering black middle-class “uplift”—marriage, conspicuous consumption, and social cachet were essential to the vacationing experience. They were also essential sites for social and business networking, and regularly hosted a variety of black clubs and organizations from New York City. Resorts provided a space for African Americans to showcase their social status and group pride in ways that were largely inaccessible to them in New York City. They claimed their dignity by purchasing private property, building luxurious summer resorts, and creating spaces for others African Americans to partake in consumer culture and display their relative wealth, all outside the view and reach of white Americans.

The form and function of summer resorts varied not only between ethnic and racial groups, but also within them. At Italian resorts, class differences shaped how vacationers’ conceived of and expressed their Italian American identity. Italian resorts catered to a more economically diverse range of vacationers than African American and Puerto Rican resorts. Secure unionized jobs with stable wages ensured that a broad range of middle-class and many working-class Italians could afford a one- to two-week summer vacation in the Catskills. Resorts like Acra Manor and Pleasant Acres helped create idealized Italian communities that did not exist in the New York metropolitan area because of changing neighborhoods, increased suburbanization, and Americanization. They also provided a private space in which Italian Americans could negotiate a sense of Italianness that aligned with white middle-class values. This same impulse was evident at the Villaggio Italia resort,

where the di Belardino family sought to foster guests' ethnic pride by educating them in Italian high culture. The resort's expressions of Italianness were more overt than at resorts catering to working- and lower-middle-class guests; their guests' economic security likely mitigated any fears of embracing their Italian heritage.

Puerto Rican resorts diverged most dramatically from resorts catering to other racial and ethnic minorities in the Catskills. Most served a largely working-class Puerto Rican clientele, and many guests were day-trippers who came up from the city by bus. Whereas middle-class Italian Americans and African Americans saw Catskills resorts as spaces to assert their upward mobility in the postwar period, Few Puerto Ricans had any pretenses that they were benefitting equally from the nation's postwar prosperity. There were a few resorts that served this function for affluent Puerto Ricans, like the Spanish-owned Villa Nueva and the Puerto Rican-owned Sunny Acres Hotel, but many more catered to working-class vacationers. Resorts served a vital role for Puerto Ricans who experienced various forms of displacement, first through the migration experience, and again through the demolition of or disinvestment in their New York City neighborhoods. Las Villas provided an essential space for Puerto Ricans to celebrate and enjoy Puerto Rican food, music, and dancing. Like African American and Italian American vacationers, Puerto Ricans sought to create a sense of community, and home, in the Catskills.

As we will see in the following chapters, the segregated resort landscape of the Catskills reflected much deeper racial and ethnic divisions within New York City and American society as a whole. Considered alongside one another, the histories of

Italian American, African American, and Puerto Rican resorts also illuminate the growing acceptance of Italian Americans, and the persistent marginalization of African Americans and Puerto Ricans over the course of the twentieth century. White-owned resorts became symbols of persistent segregation and discrimination in New York State. Unsurprisingly, they also became targets of civil rights activists' efforts to desegregate public accommodations. Tensions grew between local residents and vacationers, as more and more racial and ethnic minorities descended on the small towns of the Catskills each summer. The same tensions were simmering in New York City in the 1960s and 1970s, and resorts became essential spaces for social and political organizing. Ironically, the mountains that in the nineteenth century embodied the links between tourism and national identity came instead to highlight the persistence of racial and ethnic divisions in America's supposedly color-blind, integrated, "nation of nations."

CHAPTER 3

THE RACIAL AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES OF THE RESORT LANDSCAPE

In August 1958, Eunice and George Grier crisscrossed the Catskill and Shawangunk Mountains looking for evidence of bigotry and exclusion. The Griers were working for the New York State Commission Against Discrimination (SCAD), a state agency conducting a wide-ranging survey of discrimination against minority groups in the Catskill Mountains resort area. As part of their research, they interviewed twenty-seven individuals they hoped would reliably shed light on prevailing attitudes toward different racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. Interviewees included a range of community figures, from Chamber of Commerce representatives and religious leaders to resort proprietors and business owners. SCAD Regional Director F. Peter Libassi encouraged the Griers to be earnest and conversational during their investigation (e.g., “We want to understand your point of view”) rather than accusatory and antagonistic.¹ Most interviewees were good-natured and helpful, leading the Griers to believe they had received a candid and honest assessment of their communities’ prevailing racial attitudes and beliefs. They also found a resort landscape that confounded easy generalizations. In a preliminary report of their findings submitted to SCAD Commissioner J. Edward Conway, the Griers concluded “It is only possible to understand the Catskills resort situation if one recognizes that there are thousands of them, almost all

¹ F. Peter Libassi to George and Eunice Grier, “Churches Nearby Survey, Public Accommodations Program,” August 4, 1958, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

independently operated by very independent people whose differing personalities and backgrounds keynote their method of operation.”²

While the Griers were interviewing local citizens, SCAD field representatives Arthur P. Swerdlove, Harry Anderson, and S.J. Amato were also investigating their way through the resort area. Whereas the Griers sought to draw broad observations and conclusions about discriminatory attitudes in the area, the field representatives’ task was more challenging—to interview thirty-seven resort owners who had complaints filed against them with SCAD, and to find evidence supporting or disproving these complaints. Their work required detailed, and often unwelcome, examination of resort owners’ business practices. They interviewed resort owners, inquired about their knowledge of state discrimination laws, examined guest registers, analyzed resort advertisements and brochures, and recorded in-depth descriptions of the resorts, their facilities, and the racial and ethnic backgrounds of their guests and employees. Some resort owners, whether out of genuine concern or fear, were warm and accommodating. Others were curt, evasive, or openly hostile.

At the Hill Top Farm in Norton Hill, Arthur Swerdlove was greeted—and badly bitten—by the resort owner’s dog. Ever the diligent public servant, Swerdlove conducted a near-complete investigation (he left a bit early “to get medical attention as soon as possible”) and wrote up a thorough six-page

² Eunice and George Grier to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, “Survey of Public Accommodations in Catskills Resort Area—Preliminary Report,” September 3, 1958, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

investigative report of the visit.³ Undeterred, he continued his work the next day at Stager's Farm House in Acra, where he encountered a resort owner who "was belligerent, obnoxious, and for quite some time after I arrived . . . refused to cooperate in the investigation. She shouted at me when I arrived, accused me of persecuting her, and said I had no right to be there."⁴ The resort owners were indeed "very independent people," and these variables ensured that the work of a SCAD field investigator could be an unpredictable, thankless, and even perilous, job.

The New York State Commission Against Discrimination was established in 1945 to enforce the Ives-Quinn Act, or Law Against Discrimination. The law, passed by the New York State legislature in the same year, prohibited employment discrimination based on race or religion in New York State. The law gave SCAD enforcement powers to "initiate investigations, issue subpoenas, hold public hearings, and issue court-enforceable orders."⁵ The Law Against Discrimination was expanded on July 1, 1952, giving SCAD power to investigate complaints in places of public accommodation, including restaurants, barbershops, public pools, hotels, and resorts. New York State had passed a civil rights law outlawing discrimination in public accommodations in 1873, but the law was not used successfully until the

³ Arthur P. Swerdlove to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, "American Jewish Congress vs. Hill Top Farm, Case No. CP-3916-55: Investigation Report" October 24, 1958, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice's Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

⁴ Arthur P. Swerdlove to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, "American Jewish Congress vs. Stager's, Case No. CP-3929-55: Investigation Report," October 24, 1958, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice's Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

⁵ *To Stand and Fight*, 100.

1940s.⁶ The 1952 law shifted these cases from criminal to civil rights offenses to be handled by SCAD.⁷ When the 1952 law was passed, ordinary individuals and civil rights organizations immediately began filing complaints with the Commission in an effort to challenge Northern de facto segregation. The Catskills resort area—clearly fragmented along ethnic, racial, and religious lines—became a prominent target of their efforts.

The 1958 SCAD survey was born of repeated efforts by the American Jewish Congress (AJC) to draw attention to discrimination against Jewish vacationers in New York State resort areas. The AJC's efforts began with a complaint filed in 1952 against resorts that used the phrase "churches nearby" in promotional materials. The complaint argued that the phrase merely perpetuated a new form of old discriminatory practices; "churches nearby," it argued, was coded language implying that Jews were not welcome. In 1953, SCAD ruled that this practice was not inherently discriminatory. This decision prompted further action from the AJC: in 1955, it filed an additional 37 complaints against resorts in the Catskills and Adirondacks for the same offense. In an inter-office memorandum to SCAD Chairman Ward B. Arbury, Executive Director John R. Fox wrote that he believed the AJC filed the new complaints "to punish this Commission for deciding against their point of view two years ago," and he worried that dealing with each case individually would be a time-consuming, bureaucratic nightmare. The proper investigation of all the complaints, he said, "would be a task that would probably

⁶ *To Stand and Fight*, 80-81.

⁷ *To Stand and Fight*, 190.

occupy two field men all summer.” SCAD officials proposed an alternative: rather than pursuing each individual complaint, field representatives would instead conduct an extensive survey of discriminatory practices and attitudes in the resort areas. The AJC agreed, promising to suspend their pursuit of the complaints until the survey’s conclusion.⁸ The resulting survey included resorts in Ulster, Sullivan, and Greene Counties—as well as a few resorts in the Adirondacks—and was part of SCAD’s effort to combat discrimination in places of public accommodation in New York State.

The SCAD investigation came at a time when African Americans and other minorities increasingly challenged their exclusion from public and private recreational spaces throughout the United States. New York was no exception in terms of discrimination; despite the state’s strongly worded civil rights laws, African Americans were often denied access to public accommodations. As American prosperity grew in the postwar period, more and more racial minorities had the means to partake in recreational opportunities, and they demanded access to the same spaces of leisure and consumption as their white counterparts.⁹ Historical analyses of these civil rights efforts have tended to focus on urban recreational spaces, but the Catskill Mountain resort area was also an important site of protest. Only a few hours distant from New York City, the mountains were in some ways an

⁸ John R. Fox to Ward B. Arbury, “American Jewish Congress Complaints – ‘Nearby churches,’” June 30, 1955, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files; Ward B. Arbury, “Memo. For the files,” August 23, 1955, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

⁹ *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 8.

extension of the urban recreational landscape. Being close and affordable, the mountains were popular among a growing number of city residents. Unlike public pools, beaches, and amusement parks in the New York metropolitan area, the remote and dispersed nature of the resort area made anti-discrimination campaigns a challenge to carry out. It was easy for resort owners to illegally keep unwanted guests out. With thousands of individual resorts, these discriminatory practices might go unexposed and unchecked.

While civil rights activists were challenging discrimination at Catskills resorts, the number of resorts catering to minority groups continued to grow. For African Americans and Puerto Ricans, a minority-run resort was an appealing alternative to trying to stay at a white resort where they might be made to feel unwelcome, or turned away completely. Despite the privacy and security that these resorts provided for vacationers, they were never entirely removed from white racism and animosity. Well into the postwar period, many minority resort owners and vacationers found that they were still not fully accepted in the rural, predominantly white communities of the Catskill Mountains. These communities may have been economically reliant on the tourism industry, but they did not welcome ethnic and racial minorities with open arms.

Interviews and investigation reports from the SCAD survey provide a rare glimpse into the discriminatory attitudes and practices of both white resort owners and local residents. Many interviewees were remarkably forthcoming with SCAD investigators, and a few resort owners casually admitted to their discriminatory practices. The white owner of the Hill Top Farm in Norton Hill told Arthur

Swerdlove that a group of African Americans tried to stay at her boarding house and “she told them that she had no room, although this was untrue. . . . she asked me, ‘Be honest now, would you want to sit on the porch with colored or eat at the same table with them?’”¹⁰ Some interviewees voiced frustrations about the many ethnic minorities who established resorts in the Catskills. The Secretary-Director of the Windham Chamber of Commerce told Eunice and George Grier that Hunter, New York was a place “where the Jews took over, and now it is going down hill. You can see it with your eyes. . . . Now the Jews are leaving and the Italians are taking over. It’s getting worse and worse.”¹¹ Just as some white ethnic resort owners resented the intrusion of racial minorities at their establishments, some native-born whites resented the intrusion of racial *and* ethnic minorities in their communities.¹² These vacationers aroused varying levels of suspicion, contempt, and fear among the resort area’s white residents.

¹⁰ Arthur P. Swerdlove to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, “American Jewish Congress vs. Hill Top Farm, Case No. CP-3916-55, Investigation Report,” October 24, 1958, folder 2, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

¹¹ Interview with the Secretary-Director of the Windham Chamber of Commerce, Greene County, undated, ca. August – September, 1958, folder 1, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

¹² Local whites’ comments were not unlike those expressed by white ethnics in New York City, who feared and resented the incursions of racial minorities moving into “their” neighborhoods, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. A Jewish attorney in the Canarsie neighborhood of Brooklyn described the decline he perceived when Puerto Ricans moved in: “The Puerto Ricans came in, and the cockroaches came in. East New York used to be quiet on the High Holidays, but suddenly there was noise and gangs and bodegas. We no longer felt comfortable sleeping outside on mattresses on the fire escape on hot summer nights.” *Canarsie*, 22.

Resort owners used a variety of strategies for attracting guests of their own race, ethnicity, or religion. In the 1920s and 1930s, resort owners controlled public awareness of their resorts by relying on word-of-mouth recommendations or advertising in ethnic newspapers. These practices continued in the postwar period. In their report to SCAD Commissioner Conway, Eunice and George Grier noted that “almost all Catskills resorts except some of the very largest include some sort of ethnic clue in their on-site advertising signs and in highway billboards approaching the site.”¹³ Vacationers could usually determine a resort’s clientele from its name, the type of cuisine it advertised, or other ethnic symbols.

In the postwar decades, many white ethnic resort owners began advertising in newspapers that served a broader audience, such as the *Brooklyn Eagle* and the *New York Journal-American*. They used a variety of “ethnic clues” (in the words of Eunice and George Grier) to make their ethnic affiliations clear.¹⁴ The owners of the Pine Grove House in Purling advertised their “German-American cooking and baking.” The Rocco Boarding House in Cairo advertised “Home-Made Neapolitan Cooking.” Joe’s Inn in Cairo noted the resort’s “Italian Kitchen” with “Ravioli Served

¹³ I rely primarily on the Griers’ preliminary report to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, rather than their final report. Because the driving force behind the SCAD investigation was discrimination against Jewish vacationers, the Griers’ final report omitted a great deal of information about discrimination against other racial and ethnic minorities. The final report offered an extremely watered down version of the preliminary report, returning to the primary issue that prompted the investigation: whether “Churches Nearby” was a phrase meant to discourage Jewish patronage. By contrast, the preliminary report offers a number of rich observations about the diversity and complexity of the resort landscape. Eunice and George Grier to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, September 3, 1958.

¹⁴ “Survey of Public Accommodations in Catskills Resort Area—Preliminary Report,” 7-8.

Twice Weekly Prepared by Madam Benzi.”¹⁵ Advertisements for the O’Neill House in East Durham were framed with shamrocks, in an obvious nod to the resort’s Irish-American clientele.¹⁶ The village of East Durham became so associated with Irish-American resorts that in 1951, the resorts began advertising collectively in the *Brooklyn Eagle’s* Summer Resort and Travel Directory under the heading “IRISH HOSPITALITY AT ITS BEST.”¹⁷ These strategies were all perfectly legal, and made good business sense for resort owners seeking to draw a particular ethnic clientele.

When resorts did not offer any “ethnic clues” in their promotional materials, they often offered racial ones. The racial composition of the clientele was readily apparent in white ethnic resorts’ brochures; pictures of dozens of smiling white people playing tennis, eating dinner, and dancing in resort nightclubs indicated that, at the very least, black guests were out of the ordinary. In a recreational landscape overflowing with resorts, these kinds of “clues” indicated to visitors that they were in the right (or wrong) place.

These dynamics contributed to the dramatic racial and ethnic segregation of the Catskill Mountain resort area in the postwar decades. The SCAD survey results illuminated this point: in a memo to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, Eunice and

¹⁵ Advertisement for the Pine Grove House in “Brooklyn Eagle Summer Resort and Travel Directory Section, 1952,” Supplement to *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 1, 1952; advertisement for Rocco Boarding House in “Cairo in the Catskills: Comprising Cairo, Purling, Acra, Round Top, So. Cairo”; advertisement for Joe’s Inn, “Brooklyn Eagle Summer Resort and Travel Directory Section, 1946,” Supplement to *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 9, 1946.

¹⁶ *New York Journal-American*, June 8, 1958.

¹⁷ “Brooklyn Eagle Summer Resort and Travel Directory Section, 1951,” Supplement to *Brooklyn Eagle*, June 3, 1951.

George Grier reported, “Ethnic segregation is present in the Catskills to a degree which is striking even upon superficial observation.” They continued, “Some towns are spoken of as ‘Italian towns,’ while others have an assortment of ethnic groups. Specific resorts are spoken of by local residents as ‘an Irish place,’ ‘a Jewish place,’ ‘an Italian place,’ etc.”¹⁸ These trends were already underway in the 1920s and 1930s, but the settlement patterns became increasingly apparent as the Catskills grew in popularity among racial and ethnic minorities after World War II. The diverse and growing crowd of vacationers magnified the visibility of different ethnic and racial groups, and the boundaries that divided them.

SCAD investigators found that, despite clear evidence of discriminatory attitudes in the Catskills, many local observers and resort owners believed that this ethnic and racial segregation was largely a matter of personal predilections. In an interview with the Griers, the Director of Ulster-Greene Counties Vacationlands succinctly articulated this common belief: “If you were Italian, could you stand sauerbraten three times a week?”¹⁹ He was correct—European ethnic groups largely chose to vacation among people with similar ethnic backgrounds. The causes of segregation ran much deeper than individual vacationers’ culinary preferences, however. The Director also noted that “many resort owners felt they had the threat of Negroes and Puerto Ricans hanging over their heads,” and many feared that their white guests would leave if black vacationers were

¹⁸ “Survey of Public Accommodations in Catskills Resort Area—Preliminary Report,” 5.

¹⁹ Interview with the Director of Ulster-Greene Counties Vacationlands, undated, ca. August – September, 1958, folder 1, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

accommodated.²⁰ The Griers concluded, “It seems fairly certain – except in the case of Negroes – that the patterns [of segregation] are rarely the consequence of concerted action, but are the resultant of the independent actions of many individuals.” In short, African Americans represented the exception to the general self-segregation rule. Although they went unmentioned in the Griers’ memorandum, Puerto Ricans, too, were an exception.²¹

In stark contrast, the boundaries between white ethnic resorts were quite fluid. European American vacationers did not assert a sense of shared European heritage, and most vacationed with people of similar ethnic backgrounds. But at an Italian resort, no one would question the presence of an Italian guest’s Irish husband, or turn away a Jewish vacationer who enjoyed Italian food and music. Even as Italian Americans and other European Americans celebrated and asserted their ethnic distinctiveness at ethnic resorts, their whiteness was accepted without question. The segregated nature of the resort area reflected segregation patterns at work in other areas of New Yorkers’ lives—in union structure, employment, and housing, and education, among others.²² Italian Americans’ increasing assimilation and acceptance was bolstered by a variety of federal programs in the 1930s and 1940s that facilitated their upward mobility while denying the same privileges to

²⁰ Interview with the Director of Ulster-Greene Counties Vacationlands, SCAD Case Files.

²¹ Discrimination against Jews was a problem in the Catskills, particularly in earlier decades, but by this time period the targets of discrimination have shifted to African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans were only briefly mentioned in a couple of the SCAD interviews, and were not mentioned at all in the Griers’ preliminary report.

²² *Working-Class New York*, 180-196.

racial minorities. Summer resorts in the Catskills built upon and naturalized these divisions. Ethnic preferences could not alone account for the resort area's segregation.

The SCAD survey provides a valuable, but incomplete, starting point for investigating the racial and ethnic boundaries of the Catskills resort landscape after World War II. The survey found significant evidence of discrimination against racial minorities, but African American and Puerto Rican voices were entirely absent.²³ They appear as potential threats to racial harmony at white-owned resorts, or as passive victims of white intolerance, but their routine experiences of discrimination—and their efforts to overcome it—are never described in their own words. Although the survey's conclusions were solid, SCAD did not conduct a single interview with a non-white resort owner, vacationer, or local resident. This chapter re-examines the racial and ethnic boundaries of the Catskills resort landscape, and seeks to fill in some of these crucial missing pieces of the 1958 survey.

"We Don't Have the Facilities": African Americans

In 1945, the *New York Amsterdam News* conducted an informal survey to determine the extent to which hotels, summer resorts, and country clubs in the New York area discriminated against black visitors. When a reporter contacted the Sha-

²³ This was likely because the survey was prompted by complaints filed by the American Jewish Congress. Still, given that the survey was intended to investigate discrimination more broadly in the Catskills resort area, this was a striking omission.

Wan-Ga Lodge in High View to inquire about accommodations, the manager of the resort, Mr. Morgan Atlas, told the caller:

‘We don’t take Negroes,’ he said; ‘We don’t have the facilities.’ But he could not say what facilities he was talking about . . . he would not make a reservation and said that if we had made one by mail, he would turn us back at the door.

Atlas went on to explain that he accommodated “a strictly Jewish clientele.” He claimed, “if white Christian Gentiles came there he would tell them they were in the wrong place,” but he also “refused to say whether or not he would turn such persons from the door.”²⁴ Sadly, resorts like the Sha-Wan-Ga Lodge that refused to accommodate African Americans were sometimes resorts that catered to white ethnic populations that had been similarly discriminated against. Before being purchased by a Jewish family, the Sha-Wan-Ga Lodge was a Christian resort, whose travel brochures featured a blunt warning: “No Hebrews Accommodated.”²⁵

Atlas’s policy was illegal under New York State law. At the time of the *Amsterdam News* investigation in 1945, public accommodations were not yet under SCAD’s purview (this would happen in 1952). But discrimination in public accommodations on the basis of race or religion had been illegal since the state passed its first Civil Rights Act in 1873. The *Amsterdam News* investigation revealed that, despite being legally obligated, many resorts refused to accommodate black patrons. Most of the resorts the *Amsterdam News* contacted did not follow Sha-Wan-Ga Lodge’s explicitly discriminatory policy, but Atlas’s response was consistent

²⁴ Alger L. Adams, “Resort Hotels Ignore State Anti-Bias Laws,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 18, 1945.

²⁵ *Catskill Culture*, 27.

with the attitudes and concerns of many other white ethnic resort owners. Resort owners commonly blamed their discriminatory practices on their guests' biases and fears of close contact in intimate settings with African Americans.²⁶ They frequently denied having these biases themselves, and expressed fears that if they accommodated African American guests, their white customers would promptly leave.²⁷ Although a majority of the hotel owners contacted by the *Amsterdam News* claimed to have never had any black guests (nor any inquiries from them), many became flustered, and often indignant, when asked to accommodate them.

SCAD's 1958 survey was more comprehensive than earlier investigations, but it largely confirmed the conclusions drawn by investigations like the one conducted by the *New York Amsterdam News*. More importantly, it reaffirmed African Americans' lived experience. African Americans did not need a state-sponsored investigation to know that they were unwelcome at white-owned resorts. Discrimination was illegal in New York State, but black vacationers found that Northern de facto segregation effectively blocked their access to many vacation destinations.²⁸

²⁶ More than a decade after the *Amsterdam News* survey, in 1957, *The Worker* published a similar survey of resorts in New York and New England. The newspaper concluded, "Negro vacationists are systematically barred from scores of New York and New England summer resorts by an unpublicized and highly effective policy of jimcrow." See "'Worker' Bares Jimcrow At Vacation Resorts," *The Worker*, August 4, 1957, fiche 004, 254-2, *Schomburg Clipping File*, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

²⁷ Interview with the Director of Ulster-Greene Counties Vacationlands, SCAD Case Files.

²⁸ As historian Thomas J. Sugrue has argued, "Northern blacks lived as second-class citizens, unencumbered by the most blatant of southern-style Jim Crow

The 1958 SCAD investigation also replicated information that the Commission itself had been gathering since 1952, through individual complaints filed by African Americans. In 1955, an African American woman from New York City filed a complaint stating that she made reservations to stay with her sister at a predominantly Jewish resort in Parksville, New York, on Memorial Day weekend of the same year. When she arrived at the local bus station in Parksville, the resort proprietor's son was waiting to transport them to the resort. But when he saw that they were African American, he quickly changed his mind. He told the sisters that the resort could not accommodate black guests. He left them to find their way back to New York with their \$20 deposit and an extra \$6 for their trouble. The sisters were "forced to spend a considerable amount of money on taxi cabs and other buses in order to reach home that night."²⁹

When SCAD field representative Jacob Wittner interviewed the proprietor's son about the incident, he heard a dramatically different version of the events. The son stated that he offered to accommodate the women, but provided them with a well-intentioned disclaimer: he was concerned that they might not enjoy themselves. The resort's clientele was primarily Jewish, the cooking kosher, and they would be the only black guests. He claimed that in light of this information, the complainant and her sister decided to leave. Any possibility that he acted with benevolent intentions was soon negated, however. First, he "admitted that he

laws but still trapped in an economic, political, and legal regime that seldom recognized them as equals." *Sweet Land of Liberty*, xv.

²⁹ Filed complaint, June 11, 1955, CP-3895-55, Acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

thought by complainant's name that she was of Italian origin."³⁰ His willingness to make the reservation under these circumstances suggests that he was not concerned about whether Italians would be willing to eat Kosher food and whether they would "enjoy themselves." He sealed his fate when he told the SCAD investigator over lunch that he would hire less qualified white employees over more experienced black ones, because resort employees were expected to mingle with the daughters of guests. After lunch and—in his mind, at least—back on the record, he backtracked. He claimed that he would readily hire black employees; his original comments to the investigator were made "while we were at lunch. This, however, was his official statement."³¹

Like many other white resort owners, the proprietor's son fell back on the excuse that it was resort *guests* who would not tolerate black vacationers at their resorts. The implication was that resort owners had a responsibility to accommodate their white guests' wishes and keep African Americans out. His statements reflected the reality that resorts were a common place for young single men and women to seek suitable marriage partners (and fleeting romantic encounters). If the resort hired black men, it would supposedly stoke guests' fears of interracial romance and sex.³²

SCAD ruled in favor of the complainant, finding probable cause for her complaint. The ruling stipulated that the owner's son send her a written apology,

³⁰ Jacob Wittner to Commissioner Elmer A. Carter, "Inter-Office Memorandum," June 27, 1955, CP-3895-55, Acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

³¹ Jacob Wittner to Commissioner Elmer A. Carter, "Inter-Office Memorandum," June 27, 1955, CP-3895-55, Acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

³² *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 154.

welcome her to make reservations at the resort in the future, and compensate her for the added travel expenses she incurred. He also had to notify all employees, travel agents, or other agencies that accepted reservations for the resort of its non-discriminatory policy. Notes from a meeting to discuss the ruling underscore the limitations of the Commission's approach. The proprietor's son stated that he would agree to the terms, but that he was "not so sure that it will change his attitude or that of his father." Rather, they agreed to it "in order to avoid publicity."³³

The incident illustrates the discrimination African Americans faced when seeking accommodations in the Catskills. New York's public accommodation statute, in theory, ensured the availability of a hotel room for black travelers; the complainant and her sister embarked on their trip with the reasonable assumption that their reservations would be honored. The son's evasive statements make clear that Northern Jim Crow practices were real, albeit disguised.³⁴ Even with

³³ Elmer A. Carter to resort owner, August 23, 1955; Elmer A. Carter to resort owner, September 20, 1955; Jacob Wittner to Elmer A. Carter, "Inter-Office Memorandum," September 12, 1955; all found in CP-3895-55, Acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

³⁴ Sugrue notes, "What made northern racial barriers so frustrating was that they were sometimes as hard and fast as they were in the South—but, at the same time, they could also be surprisingly and unpredictably flexible." *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 133. In recent years historians have been working to broaden the civil rights narrative to include activism in the North and West. See, for example, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005), 1233-1263; Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era*, ed. Clarence Taylor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Victoria W. Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*; Matthew J. Countryman's *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania

reservations in hand, black vacationers risked the indignity of exclusion and the extreme inconvenience of returning home or scrambling to find other accommodations. The complainant's experience highlights the persistence of Northern white racism and discrimination, and the difficulty that African Americans and state anti-discrimination agencies faced in eradicating it.

The complaint also demonstrates the diverse means by which African American activists challenged Northern segregation in public accommodations and recreational spaces in the postwar period. It is possible that the complainant and her sister were conducting a "testing" exercise to see if the resort was violating state anti-discrimination laws. "Testing" was a common strategy used by civil rights activists to desegregate public accommodations; participants visited an establishment to see if the owners were complying with state laws, and if not, they filed complaints with the state.³⁵ Whether it was an intentional strategy or not, they were part of a collective effort to desegregate places of public accommodation and enforce compliance with state antidiscrimination laws. In New York City, civil rights activists protested segregation at white-owned restaurants, parks, roller-skating rinks, swimming pools, and hotels.³⁶

Press, 2006); and Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

³⁵ See *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 146-154.

³⁶ For a discussion of civil rights activists' efforts to desegregate public accommodations in postwar New York and other Northern states, see Wolcott, *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*; Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*; and Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*.

American prosperity as a whole increased in the postwar decades, but its benefits were distributed unevenly.³⁷ Rather than eliminating social and racial rifts, postwar consumer culture reinforced old divisions and created new ones. The Cold War stifled radical black protest that intertwined civil rights language with demands for economic justice. At the governmental level, much of the civil rights debate was channeled into what historian Thomas J. Sugrue calls a “Myrdalian framework”—a reference to Gunnar Myrdal’s 1944 book, *An American Dilemma*. Myrdal believed that the solution to America’s “Negro Problem” was to educate white Americans, thereby erasing their racist attitudes and granting African Americans full equality.³⁸ But changing white people’s minds and building interracial cooperation were not the primary concerns of most African Americans. Their focus was on gaining access, not acceptance.³⁹

These two paths of protest—“Myrdalian” efforts to achieve integration by eliminating racist attitudes, and efforts to achieve equal participation in the marketplace—were not mutually exclusive. African Americans filed complaints with SCAD to demand the right to access and enjoy the same recreational spaces as white patrons. SCAD’s handling of the complaint against the Parksville resort highlights the predominance of the “Myrdalian framework” in postwar antidiscrimination efforts.⁴⁰ The ruling against the resort reflects what historian

³⁷ *A Consumer’s Republic*, 134.

³⁸ *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 83.

³⁹ *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 4.

⁴⁰ *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 83. As historian Victoria W. Wolcott has noted, “Because interracial contact and assimilation were major goals of racial liberalism, public accommodations became a focus for legal strategy and public education on

Martha Biondi described as SCAD's "policy of limited intervention": seeking compliance with state antidiscrimination laws through persuasion and moral appeals rather than coercion.⁴¹ SCAD's educational efforts, by ignoring the structural causes of racial inequality and imposing minimal punishments for discriminatory behavior, gave the resort owner and his son little incentive to change their opinions. A written apology and refunded travel expenses amounted to little more than a slap on the wrist. "Limited intervention" produced limited results.

The discriminatory practices of white resort owners and the availability of black resorts ensured that most black travelers saw little reason to seek accommodations at white resorts. Irene Gandy, a former dancer at Utopia Lodge, neatly summed up the tension between discrimination and self-segregation for black travelers: "I mean first of all . . . I don't think we were welcome there, you know? But you didn't think about going, I mean why would you go anywhere else [but black-owned resorts]?"⁴² Black activists likely saw no conflict in "testing" white-owned resorts' compliance with state laws in an effort to demand their equal participation in and access to the tourism market, while simultaneously vacationing at black-owned resorts where they would be welcome and could readily and comfortably socialize with other guests.⁴³

race." It is in this context that we should understand the state's renewed focus on public accommodations. *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 49.

⁴¹ Biondi, *To Stand and Fight*, 99-100.

⁴² Gandy, interview.

⁴³ As Thomas Sugrue notes, "Again and again, the history of northern activism confounds the simple dichotomies between integrationism and black power that shape conventional narratives of the movement." *Sweet Land of Liberty*, xxv.

Indeed, black-owned resorts like King's Lodge, Paradise Farm, and Peg Leg Bates Country Club thrived in this segregated environment. Entrepreneurial black businessmen and women established a number of resorts and an extensive communications network that allowed travelers to navigate the resort landscape with minimal discrimination and worry. The key point, however, is that African Americans could not choose among a full variety of resorts where they would be equally welcomed and respected. Even when racial minorities responded by creating their own recreational spaces, they still had to contend with the antagonism of local whites who resented their presence in the resort area.

"The Invaders": Puerto Ricans

"Can you imagine yourself in the position of a resort proprietor with a house full of Puerto Ricans, and wondering when they were going to start pulling knives?"⁴⁴ This was the blunt question that the Director of Ulster-Greene Counties Vacationlands, a publicity agency for the Northern Catskills resort area, posed to an investigator from the New York State Commission Against Discrimination in 1958. For the Director, the question was not *if* Puerto Ricans vacationing at white-owned resorts would start knife fights, but *when*. The question likely remained hypothetical. He made no indication that he knew of any white resort owners who ever had to accommodate Puerto Rican guests—only that they feared the possibility. Puerto Ricans merited barely even a mention in the 1958 SCAD survey. Although

⁴⁴ Interview with the Director of Ulster-Greene Counties Vacationlands, SCAD Case Files.

field representatives inquired about discrimination against Jews, African Americans and Puerto Ricans, Puerto Ricans were rarely discussed in the interviews. If they were mentioned at all it was generally in reference to employment. SCAD investigators commonly asked resort owners about the ethnic and racial backgrounds of their employees—and most investigations of specific resorts found no black or Puerto Rican employees on staff.⁴⁵ The Director's comment represented the only mention of Puerto Ricans *as vacationers*—and his comment presented a hypothetical, not an actual, scenario. The archival record tells us little about whether Puerto Ricans ever actually tried to vacation at summer resorts that were not owned by Spaniards or Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans did not file any resort-related complaints with the New York State Commission Against Discrimination, and contemporary newspaper investigations of discrimination in resort areas never reported any problems encountered by Puerto Ricans.⁴⁶ The archival record does, however, hold evidence of tensions and ongoing conflicts between Puerto Rican

⁴⁵ One exception is the Griers' interview with the Pastor of St. Andrews Roman Catholic Church in Ellenville (in Sullivan County). But here, too, the reference to Puerto Ricans is a vague one: the Pastor told the Griers that while there was a general atmosphere of religious tolerance in Ellenville, "relations are not so good between white and Negroes and whites and Puerto Ricans." Interview with the Pastor of St. Andrews Roman Catholic Church, Ellenville, New York, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice's Wonderland, SCAD Case Files. For inquiries about Puerto Rican employment, see for example Arthur P. Swerdlove to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, "American Jewish Congress vs. Pine Springs, Case No. CP-3924-55, Investigation Report," October 24, 1958, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice's Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD case files. Pine Springs did employ two Jewish musicians and one Chinese chef.

⁴⁶ The *New York Times* did report in 1969 that the State Division of Human Rights (the successor to SCAD) found Camp Lakota, in Wurtsboro, NY, guilty of discrimination, when it denied a 14 year-old Puerto Rican boy admission to the camp; "State Unit Rules Camp Biased In Barring of Puerto Rican Boy," *New York Times*, July 7, 1969.

resort owners, vacationers, and white residents of the town of Plattekill. Unlike African American resorts, which were relatively spread out across the Catskill Mountains, Puerto Rican resorts were clustered almost entirely in one small hamlet. This made their presence very visible, and very contentious. The remaining documentary record reveals a long history of conflict and cooperation between local whites and vacationing Puerto Ricans that was profoundly shaped by racial and class tensions.

In contrast to the Director of Ulster-Greene Counties Vacationlands, former Plattekill Town Constable Ed Wager *did* interact on a regular basis with Puerto Rican vacationers in Plattekill. In his unpublished 1995 memoir, Wager provided a candid view of Las Villas from the perspective of local white law enforcement officials. His memoir reveals some of the suspicions, fears, and frustrations that Plattekill residents felt at the arrival first of Spanish, and later Puerto Rican vacationers. These fears grew as the resorts surged in popularity in the late 1950s and increasingly catered to large numbers of working-class Puerto Ricans from New York City. Wager reflected on the history of non-English speaking (or non-Anglo “looking”) urban tourists in the small town, drawing broad generalizations about the clientele:

... the Basque and the Spanish people started to come buying all the old boarding houses and farms that could be bought, turning them into boarding houses, calling them Villas . . . Villa Garcia, Villa Victoria, Villa Nueva, Villa Guardarramas, Villa Perez. The boarders came in by the hundreds. Then we really got invaded by a different kind of people, a different element that [sic] came here before. They were violent, ill-tempered. You could not trust them or believe anything

they said. They came by the thousands. They thought they owned the world.⁴⁷

Most striking is Wager's sense that "they" were claiming title to his "world," and his sense that he and his own people had lost ownership because of an unwelcome invasion. He was uncomfortable with the town's changing identity and afraid that it was increasingly being defined by a "different element." Wager's sentiments reflected the attitudes of many local white residents, who grew increasingly intolerant of Puerto Rican vacationers in Plattekill in the 1950s and 1960s.

These descriptions underscore the extent to which Puerto Ricans were plagued by stereotypes that emphasized their supposed criminality, hypersexual behavior, and "foreignness." The same stereotypes surfaced consistently in portrayals of Las Villas by local white residents, journalists, and authors who came into contact with the resorts in various ways. Local whites frequently complained that the vacationers were criminal, unruly, and "invaded" the town every summer. Depictions of Puerto Ricans in Plattekill after World War II were not unlike depictions of Italians in the Catskills in the first decades of the twentieth century—they spoke a different language, refused to act like "good" Americans, and engaged in all kinds of colorful and criminal activities.

In his description of Las Villas, Ed Wager quickly mentioned the earliest Spanish and Basque boarding houses and then moved seamlessly into a description of the Puerto Rican resorts that existed in the second half of the twentieth century.

⁴⁷ Ed Wager, "My Life History: Hunting, Fishing, Traveling, Town History," 1995, Office of the Plattekill Town Historian.

Although he never mentioned the Puerto Rican vacationers by name (“Then we really got invaded by a different kind of people”), it is clear that the Puerto Ricans are the “different element” that Wager was referencing. He wrote his memoirs in 1995, and the bulk of his years on the police force would have come in the years that Las Villas shifted from a largely Spanish to Puerto Rican clientele. Wager echoed sentiments common among white Plattekill residents, who viewed the arrival of Spanish and Basque tourists as the beginning of an unwelcome flood of summer vacationers that became an all-out “invasion” of Puerto Ricans in the 1950s and 60s.

Wager emphasized the “foreignness” of Puerto Rican vacationers and what he believed was their inability to act like respectable Americans:

They came by chartered busload and old cars that you and I would not get in. No mufflers, loud horns, worn out tires. If the cars broke down they could get out and leave it no matter where in the road—on your lawn, in your driveway. If you yelled at them they would wave their arms and swear at you “no emabre [sic] English.”⁴⁸

Puerto Ricans seemed to do things that ordinary Americans would not, they had little respect for other individuals, and when they were in trouble, they hid behind their inability to speak English. As historian George J. Sánchez has argued, “notions of ‘foreignness’ often act to *racially* separate Americans from each other.”⁴⁹ This is evident in Wager’s descriptions, which emphasize that the Puerto Ricans were inherently different from, and inferior to, both the earlier Spanish vacationers and the “churchgoing people” of the “free friendly village of Plattekill.”⁵⁰ Local Plattekill

⁴⁸ Ed Wager, “My Life History.”

⁴⁹ George J. Sánchez, “Race, Nation, and Culture in Recent Immigration Studies,” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 18, No. 4 (Summer 1999), 70.

⁵⁰ Ed Wager, “My Life History.”

residents used Puerto Ricans' perceived foreignness to stigmatize them as inassimilable and unworthy of American citizenship.⁵¹ For Puerto Ricans, the fact that they were U.S. citizens made these portrayals particularly frustrating.

In addition to stigmatizing Puerto Ricans as a "foreign," unwelcome presence in the town, Plattekill residents also described the vacationers' arrival each summer as an "invasion" (the first chapter of Wager's memoirs was titled "The Invaders"). This was a common trope used by local residents and journalists to describe the Puerto Ricans in Plattekill. In July 1959, more than three decades before Wager penned his memoirs, the *Newburgh-Beacon News* published an article documenting the tensions between the resorts and the local community entitled "Weekend Plattekill 'Invasion' Reported." The phrase suggested that Puerto Ricans were violent intruders who needed to be kept out and defended against, and both the 1959 article and Wager's 1995 memoir suggested that criminality and violence were defining characteristics of Las Villas' patrons. Plattekill Chief of Constables James Markey told the *Newburgh-Beacon News* that there were "constant brawls, drinking and knifings and even narcotics and prostitution" at the resorts.⁵² Wager recalled a similar scene, offering a list of the many crimes committed by Puerto Rican visitors and residents of the town:

Knifings,
Domestic attempted homicide
Fights
Stealing
Hit and run

⁵¹ *Latino Crossings*, 7.

⁵² "Weekend Plattekill 'Invasion' Reported," *Newburgh-Beacon News*, July 25, 1959.

Growing marijuana⁵³

Of course, as a town constable, Wager's primary interactions with the resorts came when he was responding to reports of criminal activity. The bulk of the press coverage the resorts received revolved around reports of and ongoing concerns about crime and overcrowding that these "invaders" brought to the town. Puerto Rican resort owners and guests were rarely given positive press in local newspapers.

The language of "foreignness," "invasion," and criminality used to describe Puerto Ricans has a long history, and it is no coincidence that local whites used this language to describe the vacationers at Las Villas. When Puerto Ricans began migrating to the United States in large numbers, particularly after World War II, they did not fit easily into U.S. black and white racial categories. They were increasingly "racialized" as black and lumped together with African Americans. Both groups were plagued by "culture of poverty" stereotypes that emphasized their supposed violence, hyper-sexualization, and laziness. High rates of poverty were blamed on their dysfunctional families, rather than considering the impact of racism and discrimination.⁵⁴ These stereotypes are readily apparent in local observers' and journalists' descriptions of the Puerto Rican vacationers who came to Plattekill.

Conflicts between local residents and vacationers are often portrayed as clashes between middle-class or elite urban vacationers and ignorant country

⁵³ Ed Wager, "My Life History."

⁵⁴ See Chapter 6, "I like to be in America': Postwar Puerto Rican Migration, the Culture of Poverty, and the Moynihan Report," in *Reproducing Empire*, and Chapter 5, "How to Study the Postwar Migrant: Social Science, Puerto Ricans, and Social Problems," of *Puerto Rican Citizen*.

bumpkin locals. This was not the case in Plattekill. Local whites made sharp distinctions not only between “us” (white locals) and “them” (Puerto Rican “invaders”) but also between “respectable” and “low class” vacationers. In a 1959 article in the *Newburgh-Beacon News*, George Sisti, owner of a Plattekill grocery store and meat market was quoted as saying, “there are three classes of Puerto Ricans who come to Plattekill—‘There are good, medium and poor.’”⁵⁵ Many made a distinction between Spanish resorts like the Villa Nueva that catered to a wealthier clientele, which they deemed respectable, and the perceived urban seediness and unsavory clientele of many other villas.⁵⁶ Resorts including Villa Victoria, Villa El Nilo, and Villa Perez had the worst reputations on the “Villa Strip,” and were seen much less favorably among resort owners and locals alike. White locals tended to view their guests as a poor, crude, and even dangerous crowd from the city. By vacationing in the Catskills, they seemed to transplant their supposed inherent debauchery to the bucolic countryside.

Locals’ negative opinions of working class visitors to Las Villas were compounded by the fact that many were day-trippers who arrived in large numbers on chartered buses each weekend. George Sisti told the *Newburgh News* that “Plattekill’s problems started with ‘tourist guides’ in New York City who sell tickets for \$6 to anybody on the street and this price includes a bus ride to Plattekill, lunch

⁵⁵ “Weekend Plattekill ‘Invasion’ Reported,” *Newburgh-Beacon News*, July 25, 1959.

⁵⁶ Lorrin Thomas notes that in the early twentieth century, “Spanish origins conferred greater social status, both in and outside the *colonia* . . .” This was clearly still the case in the 1950s and 1960s, when local whites in Plattekill considered the earlier Spanish resorts much more respectable and assimilable than their Puerto Rican successors. *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 27.

at a villa and a ride home. He said these guides sell tickets to anyone.”⁵⁷ Many local residents believed that these charter buses broke down class barriers that had previously kept vacationing as the preserve of wealthy, or at least “respectable,” middle-class visitors.

In reality, crime *was* a problem at some of the villas. This is because many villas were essentially bars, where large crowds of people came for the evening, drank, danced, partied, and then went home. If crime was a greater problem at some Puerto Rican resorts than at, say, African American or Italian resorts, it was not because the guests were from an inherently violent and crude culture, as many local white residents believed, but rather because it was a bar culture, with lots of single, young vacationers looking to drink, party, and have a good time. This atmosphere was further facilitated by the close proximity of the villas to one another, allowing vacationers to easily move from place to place.

By the late 1950s and 1960s, resort owners were increasingly frustrated at the relentless negative press they received from local newspapers, and the consistent harassment they received from local law enforcement. The resort owners started to push back. In 1959, following the *Newburgh-Beacon News* article about the “Invasion” of Plattekill, Joseph P. Vega, the proprietor of Villa Victoria (sometimes considered one of the “lower class” resorts), responded to the article in a letter to the editor. Vega, an American-born man of Spanish ancestry, ran the Villa Victoria along with his Puerto Rican wife, Rita Vega. He pointed out that the newspaper generally painted a very one-sided image of Las Villas – “Up to now it

⁵⁷ “Weekend Plattekill ‘Invasion’ Reported.”

seems unfair to the owners of the established villas in Plattekill that only those ‘against’ have been heard through The News.” He proceeded to outline why he believed the descriptions of “weekend hordes” invading the town, as well as the supposed rampant crime, prostitution, and property devaluation were overblown.⁵⁸ In October 1959, Ralph Correa, who the *Newburgh-Beacon News* identified as a “partner” of the Villa Guardarramas, filed a charge against Plattekill Constable Nick Catalano, charging that Catalano “was noisy and abusive while in the Villa Guardarramas.”⁵⁹ Unsurprisingly, the Plattekill Town Board decided not to take any action against Catalano.⁶⁰

Puerto Rican resort owners and residents of Plattekill were eager to improve their relationship with the local community. Resort owners wanted their establishments to be seen as respectable and beneficial to the community. With these goals in mind, they banded together to form the Plattekill Tavern Owners Association, and worked with the Town Board and town constables to address some of these problems. In 1960, the organization met with the Town Board in an effort to address the growing number of chartered buses arriving in Plattekill each weekend.⁶¹ The same year, they raised money from members of the Association and other local businesses to install a radio in the town police car.⁶² Another

⁵⁸ “As Others See It: In Defense Of the Villas At Plattekill,” *Newburgh-Beacon News*, August 19, 1959.

⁵⁹ “Constable Hearing Set”, *Newburgh-Beacon News*, October 8, 1959.

⁶⁰ “Board Takes No Action,” *Newburgh-Beacon News*, October 15, 1959.

⁶¹ “Board, Association Work in Harmony,” *Newburgh-Beacon News*, February 26, 1960.

⁶² “How Plattekill Radio Was Installed in Car,” *Newburgh-Beacon News*, September 19, 1960.

organization, the Puerto Rican Civic Association, was formed in 1963 "to promote the social, cultural, moral and economic betterment of the Puerto Ricans in general, and particularly those residing in the community."⁶³ One of the activities promoted by the Association was to teach English to Spanish-speaking residents of Plattekill. Community volunteers who were fluent in both languages offered lessons; some, like Pedro Guardarramas, were resort and tavern owners. The goal was not unlike that of early twentieth century Americanization campaigns: to facilitate Puerto Ricans' participation in community activities and, in the process, their acceptance by local English-speaking residents.

Some Puerto Ricans in Plattekill made distinctions between the different villas in an effort to assert their own respectability. In 1971, Sunny Acres Hotel owner Ismael "Shorty" Martinez told a *New York Times* reporter, "You will find that no two villas in this town are alike. They all cater to a slightly different clientele, classwise."⁶⁴ Some villa owners believed that there were a few establishments known for brawls and crime that gave them all a bad reputation: "Most of the villas, it was agreed, try to cater to only the good class of tourists . . ."⁶⁵ Resort owners like Martinez constantly fought to defend their establishments from local nativist and racist attitudes, but it proved to be a double-edged sword. Many defended themselves by pointing to the failures of a select few resorts that catered to a supposedly less-respectable, poorer clientele. In the process, they unintentionally

⁶³ "Fiesta in Plattekill," *Highland Mid-Hudson Post*, May 28, 1964.

⁶⁴ "Villa Hopping in the 'Puerto Rican Alps.'"

⁶⁵ "Weekend Plattekill 'Invasion' Reported."

reinforced ingrained stereotypes about Puerto Rican poverty, criminality, and violence.

Puerto Ricans living year-round in Plattekill were eager to distance themselves from the negative press surrounding Las Villas and avoid blowback from their neighbors. In his 1959 letter to the editor, Joseph Vega defended his fellow resort owners, noting, “The villa owners are not only businessmen and women but also residents of Plattekill. They have their homes and families in the village and any derogatory remarks about this area is most certainly unwanted.”⁶⁶ Puerto Ricans in Plattekill knew that their perceived foreignness already targeted them as outsiders. The persistent negative press would make it even harder for them, and their children, to find acceptance in the local community. They worked hard to prove that they were not “invaders,” but rather civic-minded community members who also had the town’s best interests at heart. It was an uphill battle, and it would only become worse in the mid- to late-1960s.

A final example illustrates the similarities between the experiences of African American and Puerto Rican vacationers in the postwar decades, and shows the ways in which racism structured and limited their vacation choices. In 1964, the New York State Thruway banned charter buses from stopping at rest areas between New York City and Harriman on weekends during the summer vacation season. The *New York Times* noted that the ban was due to “serious congestion,” but many observers recognized that the ban had a disproportionate impact on poorer African American

⁶⁶ “As Others See It,” *Newburgh-Beacon News*, August 19, 1959.

and Puerto Rican vacationers who relied on charter buses to get to and from Catskills resorts on the weekends.⁶⁷

In a 1966 letter to the *New York Amsterdam News*, Mrs. Anna Belle Mack of New York City described a weekend trip to Peg Leg Bates Country Club. Because of the ban, Mack's charter bus could not stop at any rest areas on the trip home. This left the passengers "to ask the drivers to stop at various points along the highway and in the pouring rain to slide down muddy embankments into the bushes like animals." Mack wondered: "Is this humane? If public facilities are indeed for the public, then who is the public? Are they only for the whites?"⁶⁸ Indeed, a 1968 *New York Amsterdam News* article about the ban claimed that 75 percent of Peg Leg Bates's guests came by charter bus, and all evidence suggests that a similarly large percentage of Puerto Rican vacationers also traveled to the resorts by bus.⁶⁹

It is unclear if the ban was specifically intended to restrict non-white vacationers. More likely, poor vacationers were the target—people who could only afford to visit the Catskills by bus. In practice, these were largely African American and Puerto Rican vacationers. The ban was finally ruled unconstitutional after years of dispute in 1969. Ulster County Justice Sherwood E. Davis stated that he made his decision "not on the grounds of race, color or natural origin, but on the basis that this hostile legislation discriminates against charter buses in contrast

⁶⁷ "Thruway Limits Charter Buses," *New York Times*, August 20, 1964; "Letters: No Thruway Rest Stops for Buses," *New York Times*, May 12, 1968.

⁶⁸ "Pulse of New York's Public," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 3, 1966.

⁶⁹ "Javits Promises Fight On Charter Bus Ban," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 28, 1968.

with private cars, regular route buses, trucks and buses belonging to private corporations".⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the fact that the ban disproportionately affected racial minorities, and that many believed it intentionally did so, underscores the variety of means by which racism circumscribed non-white vacationers' ability to travel.

"God, That's How We Must've Looked": Italian Americans

A comparison of the experiences of Italian American, African American, and Puerto Rican vacationers in the Catskills resort area demonstrates the flexibility of ethnic identities and the rigidity of racial identities in the postwar decades. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Italians were a racialized ethnic minority that experienced discrimination and intolerance, but the hostility toward them never reached the levels of violence that African Americans experienced. By the postwar period, Italians had become a group that sometimes discriminated against other racial minorities.

Italians had long struggled with the stigma of their perceived racial inferiority in the United States. They began identifying and asserting themselves as white during the interwar period and more fully so after World War II.⁷¹ In the postwar period, Italians sought to demonstrate their Americanization by claiming their whiteness and the privileges associated with it. In the 1930s and 1940s, a variety of federal government programs and legislation, from social security to

⁷⁰ "Thruway Comfort Station Ban KOed," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 17, 1969.

⁷¹ *Living the Revolution*, 238-239.

federal housing loans, helped boost Italian Americans and other white ethnics into the middle class. Congress intentionally structured these programs to deny benefits to racial minorities by excluding agricultural and domestic workers—who were, largely, people of color.⁷² Italians' claims to whiteness were intimately connected to their living situation in urban and suburban areas. This was evident as early as the 1930s, when Italians began asserting their whiteness in response to African Americans and Puerto Ricans who began moving in large numbers into "their" neighborhoods. In the postwar decades, federal housing loans facilitated the dramatic movement of white ethnics to suburban areas. The Federal Housing Administration's loan-granting decisions were built on discriminatory assumptions; they utilized a rating system that stigmatized neighborhoods with racial minorities, while readily granting loans to white ethnics moving to all-white suburbs.⁷³ This system reinforced Italians' perception that racially mixed neighborhoods were undesirable, and detrimental to their upward mobility. To support their own whiteness, many Italians actively, often violently, policed the borders between themselves and racial minorities.⁷⁴

Italians initially faced a hostile reception in the Catskill Mountain resort landscape, but by mid-century they were largely accepted, or at least tolerated, in these upstate communities. There were still some native-born residents who resented their settlement in the resort area. The Treasurer of the Haines Falls Chamber of Commerce, told a SCAD investigator, "occasionally local people would

⁷² *When Affirmative Action Was White*, 224.

⁷³ *White On Arrival*, 167-168, and *Living the Revolution*, 239.

⁷⁴ "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People," 318.

lament that there were not more 'of our own kind' (native-born Americans) among the resort owners and visitors to the area." She blamed the popularity of ethnic resorts in the Haines Falls area primarily on "lack of initiative on the part of the local people," saying she did not sympathize with people who complained about the growth of ethnic resorts because they kept the local economy afloat. Even so, she expressed some discomfort with the growth of ethnic resorts. In reference to Italian resorts in the Haines Falls area, she noted that "some of those people can't even speak English."⁷⁵ Local residents' unease did not translate into violence toward or persecution of white immigrants and their children, however. Their complaints were more likely nostalgic laments for the passing of the nineteenth century "Grand Hotel" era in the Northern Catskills, and the cultural prestige and economic prosperity that came with it.

A former Italian American vacationer acknowledged that, even in the postwar decades, her Italian family acted in ways that seem "foreign" to the dominant white culture. She recalled watching old home videos of her family picnicking on the beach, and observed similarities between them and present-day Puerto Rican families:

We'd be eating macaroni and meatballs, and you know something? When I go to the beach now, sometimes I see like Puerto Rican families and Spanish families, and I see them all like, you know, they stand out. They're all together, they're cooking, and I'm thinking to myself, 'God, that's how we must've looked.' Yeah, they're eating rice at the beach.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Interview with the Treasurer of the Haines Falls Chamber of Commerce, undated, ca. August – September, 1958, folder 1, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice's Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

⁷⁶ Marrapodi, interview.

The observation suggests that Italian Americans recognize that their own cultural practices once seemed “foreign,” and that they feel the impulse to pass the same judgments on new immigrant populations today. It also suggests how perceptions of Italians have changed over the course of the twentieth century, and how Italians have changed perceptions of themselves—from greenhorns unfamiliar with American ways of life, to assimilated Americans.

In conversations with SCAD investigators, some Italians expressed empathy for African Americans’ plight by acknowledging their own conflicted racial past. The Italian proprietor of the Pine Springs resort in Freehold, New York, told a SCAD investigator that “he remembers when the Italian Catholics were a much discriminated against minority group and said that he wishes there was a Commission . . . in existence then.”⁷⁷ He was right—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Italians were seen as racially inferior by many native whites. He was unable to see or unwilling to acknowledge the wide gulf in violence and hostility that separated their experiences, and the ways that Italians benefitted from their privilege as *white* immigrants. From the moment of their arrival in the United States, Italian immigrants’ whiteness was never in question. By the 1930s and 1940s Italians were self-identifying as white Americans in their quest for acceptance and upward mobility; African Americans and Puerto Ricans, by virtue of their skin

⁷⁷ Arthur P. Swerdlove to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, “American Jewish Congress vs. Pine Springs, Case No. CP-3924-55, Investigation Report,” October 24, 1958, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, SCAD case files.

color, did not have the same luxury.⁷⁸ Italians' ability to gain acceptance in American society came in part through government recognition of their whiteness, and in part through their own efforts to distance themselves from their Puerto Rican and African American neighbors.⁷⁹ As Historian Jennifer Guglielmo notes, this had devastating results: "Tragically, they began to turn what had once been blamed on them—poverty, joblessness, crime, and other socioeconomic problems—on the supposedly deficient character of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and other people of color."⁸⁰

White ethnic vacationers likely saw ethnic resorts in the Catskills as "safe," reliably homogeneous spaces. They were largely insulated from debates over the integration of public and private recreational spaces in the city, and the physical violence that often accompanied these disputes—or so they thought. By the postwar decades, some Italian resort owners worried, like their Jewish, German, and Irish counterparts, that they would be forced to accommodate African Americans and Puerto Ricans at their resorts. Although many denied knowing about the existence of SCAD and the state's civil rights laws, their concerns were undoubtedly influenced by the national publicity surrounding the civil rights movement in the South. Many were undoubtedly aware of the struggles to integrate public accommodations. One of the proprietors of the Jolly House, an Italian resort in Leeds, told a SCAD investigator that "he frankly hopes he is never faced with the problem of having a Negro come there, because he would not turn the person away .

⁷⁸ *White On Arrival*, 6.

⁷⁹ *Living the Revolution*, 236.

⁸⁰ *Living the Revolution*, 265.

.. but he fears that the reaction of many of his guests would be anything but good.”⁸¹

None of the resort owners surveyed expressed similar concerns about having to accommodate their European American counterparts.

In the postwar decades, European immigrants and their descendants living in the New York metropolitan area did not assert a common European American identity. They were still divided by strong social, cultural, religious, and political differences. They did, however, find common ground in their efforts to identify, mobilize, and reap the benefits of their status as white ethnics.⁸² Italian Americans were no exception, despite their conflicted racial past in the United States.

Crossing Boundaries

Racial and ethnic boundaries in the Catskills resort area were not always clear-cut. Literal boundaries were often less important than preserving a sense of ownership of and control over space. Local residents achieved this through a variety of means: they made it difficult for nonwhite businessmen and women to buy property, made resort owners and patrons feel unwelcome in “their”

⁸¹ Arthur P. Swerdlove to Commissioner J. Edward Conway, “American Jewish Congress vs. Laub’s View House, Case No. CP-3919-55, Investigation Report,” October 23, 1958, CP-3900-55, American Jewish Congress vs. Alice’s Wonderland, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD case files.

⁸² See, for example, Jonathan Rieder’s *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn Against Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). Rieder describes the ways in which Italian and Jewish residents of Brooklyn’s Canarsie neighborhood resisted racial minorities moving into “their” neighborhood in the 1970s. He describes the ways that Canarsians marshaled these various identities: “Canarsians were like code-switchers; they could address irate tax-payers as middle-income people, laud the powers of the individual in sermons on striving, wave the banner of race before ethnocentric audiences, and invoke Italian or Jewish pride in applying to the city for program funding.” *Canarsie*, 127.

communities, or policed resort owners and patrons they deemed out of line. Resort owners preserved a sense of ownership and control by using selective advertising laden with “ethnic clues,” which suggested to unwanted guests that the food and clientele would make them feel uncomfortable. Alternatively, resort owners simply denied unwanted guests accommodations outright. Despite these tactics, local residents, resort owners, and vacationers did not view the multi-ethnic and multi-racial landscape in stark black and white terms. Although the terms of exchange were often fraught with tension, racial and ethnic boundaries were regularly transgressed.

One reason racial and economic boundaries were crossed was economics. The owners and employees of grocery stores, taxicabs, gas stations, movie theaters, restaurants, farms, and tourist attractions needed to conduct business with resort owners and patrons of all races and ethnicities. Their bottom lines required it. Local economies benefitted from, and often depended on, a thriving resort industry. Local residents knew that wealthy vacationers of many different races and ethnic backgrounds came to the Catskills with money to spend. Vacationers’ affluence was hard to miss; they dressed to the nines, drove expensive cars, and were prepared to spend while on vacation. George Algozzine, who ran a taxicab in Cairo in addition to helping out with his family’s resort, stressed this point, saying “I’m telling you, they had a lot of money, those people.”⁸³ A town of Catskill resident summed up the general attitude, at least as far as economics were concerned: “People of all nationalities come to Catskill on their vacations. But they are welcome, as most of

⁸³ Algozzine, interview.

them seem well supplied with money which they spend freely, and their cash is just as good as that of the natives.”⁸⁴

The White Horse Lodge in Westbrookville provides a striking example of how individual businesses could benefit from integration. According to a 1953 article in the *New York Amsterdam News*, the resort’s white owners, Nat and Dorothy Lukin, chose to accommodate—and specifically appeal to—African American guests. The Lukins found that opening their business to African Americans made good business sense:

The story of White Horse Lodge is typical of American enterprise, know how and risk. The interracial program got its start when White Horse Lodge accepted a young Negro couple of honeymooners who were married on a Columbia Broadcasting System TV show. They were so well treated they immediately became a walking advertisement.⁸⁵

In a separate article, *The Chicago Defender* commended the white-owned resort for not only welcoming black patrons, but also hiring black employees for more than just waiter positions. “Besides the regular help necessary for serving meals, White Horse Lodge among others, boasts colored bartenders (and they must know more than just mixing a highball) plus colored social directors who plan entertainment and programs for the guests.”⁸⁶ The resort also advertised in the black press, which was an unusual move for a white-owned establishment. The White Horse Lodge,

⁸⁴ “Random Snapshots,” *Greene County Examiner-Recorder*, August 1, 1946.

⁸⁵ “Interracial Resort Ends First Year,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 12, 1953.

⁸⁶ “Fair Play Pays At Horse Show,” *Chicago Defender*, August 8, 1953.

however, was an aberration—a rare white-owned resort that went out of its way to appeal to black vacationers.

More common instances of disregarded boundaries were the everyday business transactions and business relationships that developed to support the needs of the resort industry. These efforts often began when resort owners established business relationships with local residents in order to supply their resorts with a variety of goods and services. My Italian American grandparents, Nicholas and Anna Napolitano, owned a dairy farm one half-mile down the road from the Smith Haven resort in Pine Bush. They established a friendly business relationship with Smith Haven's African American proprietors, Judge A. Smith and Ethel Mobley Smith, who bought milk and eggs from their farm. My mother Loretta Miller recalled:

[I remember] my father going up to have a drink with Mr. Smith for Christmas . . . I remember walking in the side door, and I must've been five, six, [and seeing what] just looked like the biggest Christmas tree ever. . . . I remember sitting down, I sat there quietly, my father talked with Mr. and Mrs. Smith, had his drink for Christmas, and then we went home. I don't remember what the discussion was or anything, I just know that my parents were friends with them, you know? And they would come to the house.⁸⁷

The image is striking: a working-class dairy farmer, the son of Italian immigrants, sitting down for a friendly, if formal, drink with affluent African American resort owners. Many resort owners made similar gestures, large and small, to foster goodwill with their neighbors and local suppliers.

⁸⁷ Miller, interview.

The relative acceptance or tolerance of African American and Puerto Rican resorts was no doubt due in part to the economic benefits that they brought to the local economy. Local businesses profited from the constant stream of visitors arriving every week in the summer, as many vacationers would venture into the surrounding towns for gas, food, movies, and to visit area tourist attractions. This type of tolerance echoed throughout the Catskills resort area: Plattekill grocer George Sisti told the *Newburgh-Beacon News* in 1959 that “everyone in the town benefits from the tourist trade through sales of products and indirectly, payment of taxes.”⁸⁸ The Treasurer of the Haines Falls Chamber of Commerce told Eunice and George Grier, “if it were not for these resorts catering to specific minority ethnic groups, the economy of Haines Falls would be in a bad way . . . ‘After all, they bring us the only business we have.’”⁸⁹ Local institutions other than businesses benefitted from vacationers as well. Peg Leg Bates’s daughter, Melodye Bates-Holden, recalled that her father would take guests of Peg Leg Bates Country Club to the nearby Sampsonville United Church, where he was president of the church association and sang in the choir. In bringing guests to the church, the guests in turn brought their money: “of course, next thing I know, a few years later the church has a new carpet, new paint.”⁹⁰ De facto segregation may have spurred the development of resorts catering to African American, Puerto Rican, and other ethnic minorities, but

⁸⁸ “Weekend Plattekill ‘Invasion’ Reported,” *Newburgh-Beacon News*, July 25, 1959.

⁸⁹ Interview with the Treasurer of the Haines Falls Chamber of Commerce, SCAD Case Files.

⁹⁰ Bates-Holden, Interview.

ironically, as the resorts grew and prospered, they became integral to the economic health of the surrounding communities.

There was a darker side to interracial economic exchanges, one that was not lost on nonwhite residents of the Catskills. Willie Castillo, Jr. advised taking a closer look at the labor that made the Jewish resort area in Sullivan County possible: “You can have the Jewish Alps, but look underneath [them]—you have the blacks and the Hispanics all working to make the American life. It’s a class system.”⁹¹ While most African American, Italian, and Puerto Rican resorts were small enough that they relied primarily on the labor of family and friends, the largest white-owned resorts often utilized employment agencies to hire staff members. In practice this meant that many Jewish resorts, which were significantly larger than other resorts, relied heavily on nonwhite labor for low-level jobs. Sociologist Phil Brown, whose father worked at the Dependable Employment Agency in Monticello, recalled that the employees hired to do the most menial jobs at many Jewish resorts were known as “bimmies,” a word that is said to be “a Yiddishization of ‘bum.’” Bimmies were mostly non-white individuals hired from local employment agencies, and they were often alcoholics, ex-cons, or otherwise disadvantaged men. They did the resorts’ “dirty work,” serving as dishwashers, groundskeepers, painters, plumbers, and all-around handymen.⁹² The cruelty of the system was apparent. Brown noted that unlike other hotel staff, the bimmies were poorly paid and were not allowed to use

⁹¹ Castillo, interview.

⁹² *Catskill Culture*, 148-149. Arthur Tanney, “Bungalow Stories,” in *In the Catskills: A Century of the Jewish Experience in “The Mountains”*, ed. Phil Brown (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 121-125.

any of the resort facilities for their own leisure. While other employees and the resorts themselves were prospering, bimmies “were the one category that failed to benefit from the resorts’ opportunities. The exploitation of these workers was one of the main negative features of the Catskills.”⁹³

Interracial and inter-ethnic encounters in the Catskills were motivated by eagerness to explore resorts and cultures that seemed foreign or exotic. This was particularly true of local white residents and white vacationers. In a 1971 *New York Times* article about Las Villas, a white truck driver who had lived in Plattekill for forty years clearly revealed this impulse:

“Look, a place like Villa Nueva I can be proud of. It’s a respectable, swanky place and the food there is first-rate. The wife and I eat there ourselves on special occasions, on our anniversary, or last June when my daughter Jill graduated from high school. To us, Villa Nueva is the closest we’ll ever get to Spain. But some of these other places.” He rubbed his thick neck. “I’ll admit I used to sneak over there once in awhile when I was a kid, and I’d go looking for a little excitement. But that was normal, red-blooded American, right? But the things they do nowadays. . . There’s a little place just down the road from my uncle’s barn, the Villa Vieques. One night I’m driving past the barn and I see 10 or 15 couples inside, dancing nude. I mean they were all *naked* from head to toe. I’ll tell you truthfully, I felt like getting my shotgun.”⁹⁴

Despite the truck driver’s aggressive bravado, the anecdote betrays his sense of repulsion *and* attraction to Las Villas. He was not the only person “looking for a little excitement”—whether culinary, musical, or sexual—at Puerto Rican and African American resorts in the Catskills. Many white locals and white vacationers were attracted to the people and cultures at resorts catering to different races and

⁹³ *Catskill Culture*, 148-149.

⁹⁴ “Villa Hopping in the ‘Puerto Rican Alps.’”

ethnicities, and this too spurred inter-ethnic and interracial interactions. Yet in the Catskills resort area, racial boundaries were substantially firmer than ethnic boundaries.

Many white vacationers explored the different ethnic enclaves in the Catskills and sampled their entertainment offerings. It was not unusual for white ethnic resorts to receive considerable crossover trade from other white ethnics. Philip di Belardino, the social director of the Villaggio Italia in Haines Falls, recalled (only slightly tongue-in-cheek): “in the summer it was 90% Italian American, and in the winter it was 90% Jewish.” “I would say to my father, ‘Don’t Italians ski?’”⁹⁵ The Villaggio Italia was one of the few Italian resorts to remain open in the winter for skiing, and the number of Jewish patrons spiked during the winter months. George Algozzine, Jr. remembered socializing at Irish resorts in East Durham: “I used to go up and dance with [the Irish women] in East Durham in these dance halls. I’d start doing the Irish jigs with them.”⁹⁶ Although many resorts catered to particular ethnic groups, the boundaries between them – much like ethnicity itself – were often fluid. White ethnic guests had few inhibitions about visiting other white ethnic resorts, yet the experience could still provide the thrill and excitement of experiencing another culture’s food, music, and socializing.

White vacationers also visited African American and Puerto Rican resorts for their nighttime entertainment. The practice of whites frequenting non-white entertainment venues and nightclubs goes back to the late 1800s. Privileged whites

⁹⁵ di Belardino, interview.

⁹⁶ Algozzine, interview.

began exploring non-white and immigrant neighborhoods, red-light districts, nightclubs, and bars in urban areas at the turn of the century. This practice, known as “slumming,” became increasingly popular in the early twentieth century, and by the 1920s, black nightclubs and cabarets were particularly popular among white “slummers.”⁹⁷ Slumming provided privileged whites with an outlet where they felt free from restrictive middle-class sexual mores. It also allowed them to feel racially and morally superior to non-whites and reinforce their perceptions of supposedly hypersexual and immoral racial minorities.⁹⁸

Although slumming decreased in popularity after World War II, the practice did not end entirely. Whites did venture into African American and Puerto Rican nightclubs at the Catskills resorts, most likely for similar reasons as before. Authors and journalists outside of the Plattekill area who reported on Las Villas offered white readers a glimpse into the seemingly exotic, foreign world of Puerto Rican culture. A 1971 *New York Times* article, “Villa Hopping in the ‘Puerto Rican Alps,’” presented a picture of Puerto Rican vacationers that wove together the common stereotypes of the day. It reinforced the impression that criminality was an inherent characteristic of poor, inner-city Puerto Ricans, and depicted Puerto Rican men and women as hypersexual and hot-tempered. The article began with the author observing an argument between

⁹⁷ For a discussion of the rise of slumming at the turn of the twentieth century, see Chapter 6, “‘The Noble Spectacle’: Historical Walking Tours and Ethnic Slumming, 1890s-1915,” in Catherine Cocks, *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁹⁸ Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 102.

two athletic-looking men in star-spangled T-shirts, a dark, pin-stripe-suited man with a straw hat, and a large, boisterous woman in a low-cut red dress. The two star-spangled athletes began tugging at the woman's fleshy left arm, bickering in colorful Spanish, as the straw-hatted man pulled energetically at her right arm. The woman, the hefty bone of their Solomonic contention, laughed uproariously, even as the top of her dress ripped at both ends. Suddenly four patrol cars swooped down with lights flashing and sirens wailing. A tall, husky Puerto Rican policeman was the first to get out and step between the hostile parties. There was some fast Spanish banter back and forth, an exchange of backslaps, a few earthy cracks from the officer, more loud, gravelly laughter from the woman, and the three men settled their differences with a handshake and a Latin embrace. The officer led the woman away, his hand on her shoulder, as she laughed huskily and pinched his cheeks.⁹⁹

The author presents the incident as a standard encounter on a hot summer night at Las Villas. By emphasizing machismo-fueled fights among hot-blooded Puerto Rican men, highly sexualized women, and the routine intervention of the Plattekill police, the article reinforced persistent, nagging stereotypes about Puerto Ricans. In a characteristically overdramatic (and only slightly tongue-in-cheek) tone, the author warned readers, "On Saturday nights, brawls, knifings and casual soliciting by weekending prostitutes are not uncommon in the seedier 'open' villas. If that's what you're after, the rural *ambiente* of the Villa Strip can include all of the vices and most of the urban hazards of an East New York or Newark dive." The author casually connected crime in the city with crime in the country, without ever considering the urban upheaval experienced by New York City's Puerto Rican population in the 1960s and 70s that may have caused some of the "vices and hazards" he identified.

⁹⁹ "Villa Hopping in the 'Puerto Rican Alps,' *New York Times*, September 26, 1971.

He presented the experience as a sort of thrilling, dangerous encounter with an exotic Puerto Rican underworld.

Music and dancing attracted white patrons to both Puerto Rican and African American resorts. Sometimes the cultural appropriation was blatant: Willie Castillo, Jr. worked as a bartender at Sunny Acres in Plattekill, and recalled one white couple that was regularly spotted at Las Villas. The man, always sharply dressed in a bowtie and suit jacket (“like a Fred Astaire wannabe”), would hover at the edge of the dance floor to “study the dancers.” The man would then take his own dance partner out to the floor, where he would adjust and correct her moves. Castillo thought that the man “must’ve had a dance school,” and he came to learn from the best—“because *some of the best* dancers came up” from New York City each weekend.¹⁰⁰ These white voyeuristic tendencies were also evident at African American resorts. At Peg Leg Bates Country Club, nightlife was the only aspect of the business that drew white visitors. Bates lamented that he could not convince whites to stay at his resort.¹⁰¹ A professional promotional photograph of Utopia Lodge resort in Greenfield Park showed black guests dancing in the resort nightclub while white patrons watched on in the background in a voyeuristic manner.

Although black resorts occasionally drew white guests, most black resort owners did not go out of their way to attract white customers. A few black resorts explicitly advertised themselves as interracial. Smith Haven, Paradise Farm, Peg Leg Bates Country Club, and Glen Terrace Hotel were all advertised as interracial at

¹⁰⁰ Castillo, interview.

¹⁰¹ “A Legend and His Catskills Resort for Blacks,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1985.

different points during the 1950s and 1960s, but inconsistently, and always in advertisements in African American newspapers. They were not actively seeking white customers in newspapers read by predominantly white audiences.¹⁰² In turn, African American guests were said to be welcome at many Jewish resorts, but it is unclear how many actually stayed there. High-profile African Americans such as Jackie Robinson and Sammy Davis Jr. occasionally visited Jewish resorts, and black performers engaged to work at the resorts often stayed and socialized with guests, but there is little evidence that the resorts drew large numbers of African American guests.¹⁰³

More commonly, white-owned resorts hired African American and Latino musicians and entertainers to perform at their resorts. Puerto Rican, Cuban, and other Latino musicians were quite prominent at the Jewish resorts in the 1950s and 60s. The popularity of Latin music and dance was reflected in a nationwide “mambo craze” that was nowhere more apparent than in the Catskills.¹⁰⁴ A number of famous Puerto Rican musicians, including Tito Puente and Eddie Palmieri, held steady gigs at the largest Jewish resorts including Grossinger’s, Kutsher’s, and the Concord. Most Jewish resorts even had a designated “Mambo Night” and resident

¹⁰² Advertisements in the summer vacation sections of black newspapers had sporadic references to resorts being “interracial” (see Smith Haven ad, July 3, 1954, NYAN; Paradise Farm ad, June 12, 1965, NYAN; also peg leg bates ad, 1963, Glen Terrace, NY Age, August 1, 1953), but they didn’t consistently advertise themselves as such.

¹⁰³ *It Happened in the Catskills*, 54-55.

¹⁰⁴ *It Happened in the Catskills*, 133-141.

Latin dance instructor.¹⁰⁵ The most well known Latino musicians, like Tito Puente, played primarily at Jewish resorts when they were in the Catskills. Puerto Rican musician and bass player Andy Gonzalez noted that, “If you were playing in a Jewish resort that was probably it, that was your gig, and when you had off from those places you would run around to the Spanish places [Las Villas] to hang out.”¹⁰⁶ The owner of Sunny Acres in Plattekill, Shorty Martinez, realized that he could entice some of these top-name performers by inviting them to come to Las Villas on Sundays, when they had the day off from work at Jewish resorts.¹⁰⁷ Latino musicians prioritized working at the Jewish resorts because they were much larger and significantly more profitable establishments, and therefore paid better than gigs in Plattekill.

African American and Latino performers had conflicting memories of these experiences. Some, like African American singer Billy Eckstine, felt welcome at the Jewish resorts and did not recall experiencing any discrimination: “I don’t want to sound naïve, but that was something I was never aware of. I don’t remember

¹⁰⁵ In his examination of Jewish/Latino musical exchange, historian Josh Kun asserts that “Latino/a musicians were prominent fixtures on the Catskills so-called Borscht Belt touring circuit, so much so that they were thought of as part of the Catskills scene, honorary Jews without whom the Catskills would not have been the Catskills.” Kun also documents some of the interesting musical collaborations to come out of this exchange, including Irving Fields’ *Bagels and Bongos*, Joe Quijano’s *Fiddler on the Roof Goes Latin*, and Johnny Conquet’s *Raisins and Almonds Cha Cha Cha and Merengues*. See Kun, “Bagels, Bongos, and Yiddeshe Mambos, or The Other History of Jews in America,” *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 23, No. 4 (2005), 57-58.

¹⁰⁶ Andy Gonzalez interview, September 20, 1991. “The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills” exhibit, Folklore Archive, DCHA.

¹⁰⁷ Castillo, interview.

breaking down walls—there were no walls to break down.”¹⁰⁸ Others were aware that discrimination had been a problem in the Catskills in previous decades, but did not experience it personally. African American Comedian Nipsey Russell recalled that earlier black performers like Bill “Bojangles” Robinson “were variety entertainers, not headliners,” but that by the time he began performing at the Concord (likely sometime in 1960s), “I was accepted.” He recalled having “pretty heavy discussions” with politically-engaged college students at the resorts—“I learned from these kids, and they learned from me.”¹⁰⁹

Peg Leg Bates was one of the earlier performers who experienced discrimination at Jewish resorts, and he said that the negative experience inspired him to open his own resort for African Americans. Tito Puente’s band members similarly recalled being subject to arbitrary color lines. While performing at the Concord hotel, the musicians with lighter skin were allowed to stay in hotel rooms, while darker-skinned musicians had to stay in “the black cabin area”—meaning, presumably, the bungalows where black workers were housed. Puerto Rican percussionist Willie Bobo remembered Tito Puente blowing up in anger when one of his musicians was asked to bring a guest’s luggage to their room. Italian American trumpeter Vincent “Jimmy” Frisaura recalled, “Overall, I found these [Jewish] people a little bizarre—like unaware, after all the shit they had gone through you would think they would be more understanding.”¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ *It Happened in the Catskills*, 163.

¹⁰⁹ *It Happened in the Catskills*, 164.

¹¹⁰ Joe Conzo with David A. Perez, *Mambo Diablo: My Journey with Tito Puente* (Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, 2012), 136-137.

These recollections are supported by complaints that lesser-known musicians filed with the New York State Commission Against Discrimination. Although larger resorts like the Concord and Grossinger's more readily hired African American and Puerto Rican musicians, various forms of discrimination against nonwhite entertainers were evident at resorts of all sizes through the 1950s. Jewish resort owners regularly hired nonwhite musicians to play at the resorts, but usually for short gigs as variety entertainers, rather than as headliners or house bands. In 1951, an African American musician filed a complaint against a resort in Monticello, alleging that he and his band were denied a gig at the resort because they were African Americans and the resort catered to a Jewish clientele. The hotel manager told SCAD investigators that they were concerned that the band would not "be able to play the Jewish folk and religious music," and that "members of the band are expected to mingle somewhat with the guests and that many of the guests bring or send their daughters . . . with the expectation that they will meet eligible men who might escort them during the vacation period and who hopefully might marry them." He believed that his guests would be dissatisfied if members of a "Negro band" were mingling with these young women. Similarly, in a 1953 a four-piece orchestra with two white members and two black members filed a complaint against a Jewish resort in Greenfield Park after being told that the hotel owners would not hire a "mixed band," because the guests would object.¹¹¹ An agent from a New York City entertainment agency told a SCAD investigator that there was

¹¹¹ See C-2762-51, acc. 10409-83, box 1, SCAD Case Files; C-3331-53, acc. 10409-83, box 5, SCAD Case Files.

informal "policy" regarding interracial bands—"it is the 'policy of the field' not to refer interracial bands, (white and Negro), to resort hotels in the Catskills."¹¹²

White vacationers could hear Tito Puente perform mambo numbers or see Peg Leg Bates or Bill Bojangles Robinson dance a tap routine from the comfort of their own resorts. The presence of minority entertainers at a white resort promised safe, yet "exotic" entertainment. To see these performers, it was not necessary to go to Las Villas, Paradise Farm, or Peg Leg Bates Country Club, where they would be in the minority. Despite white vacationers' tremendous appreciation for black and Latino music and culture, the terms of exchange were decidedly uneven.

Conclusion

The segregated Catskills resort landscape reflected the postwar entrenchment of racial identities in American society more broadly. This was particularly true for people of European descent, who increasingly embraced their status as white ethnics and the privileges associated with their whiteness. As large numbers of upwardly mobile Italians fled to New York City's suburbs in the postwar decades, Italians who stayed in the city grew increasingly protective of their urban neighborhoods and sought to keep Puerto Ricans and African Americans out. This protective behavior, combined with persistent housing discrimination, meant that racial minorities lived in increasingly segregated urban neighborhoods.

¹¹² Edward L. Carter, Jr. to Commissioner Elmer A. Carter, "Supplemental Report," August 7, 1953, C-3331-53, acc. 10409-83, box 10, SCAD Case Files.

In the Catskills, white ethnic resorts catered primarily to people with a shared ethnic identity, but readily accommodated other white Americans. By contrast, nonwhite vacationers faced tremendous uncertainty when seeking hotel accommodations. Even in New York State, where public accommodation statutes seemingly ensured the availability of a hotel room, African Americans and Puerto Ricans risked the embarrassment and anger of being denied accommodations because of their race. When African Americans and Puerto Ricans were present at white ethnic resorts, they were rarely guests. More commonly they were employed to do the most menial hotel jobs, or were musical performers hired to entertain white vacationers. Even when racial minorities stayed at their own summer resorts, they still had to contend with potential harassment and hostility from local white community members.

The ethnic and racial boundaries of the Catskills resort landscape reveal that whereas ethnicity “is more tolerant of split categorizations and multiplicity, and categorical entry and exit are easier,” racial divisions are much more rigid.¹¹³ The segregated resort landscape seemed natural to white ethnic resort owners and vacationers. Many thought it was a benign reflection of vacationers’ ingrained cultural preferences. In reality, the resort landscape reaffirmed insidious patterns of segregation and inequality that existed in New York City and throughout the United States.

¹¹³ Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, “Conceptual Confusions and Divides: Race, Ethnicity, and the Study of Immigration,” in *Not Just Black and White: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States*, ed. Nancy Foner and George M. Fredrickson (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2004), 29.

CHAPTER 4

THE POLITICS OF LEISURE, 1965 - 1975

In late August 1973, New York City Democratic mayoral candidate Abraham D. Beame set off in the “Beameobile”—a red, white, and blue campaign bus—for a three-day tour of twenty-three hotels in the Catskill Mountains resort area.¹ In his stops at Italian resorts including the Villaggio Italia, Villa Maria, Villa Vosilla, and Angeloni’s, vacationers repeatedly asked Beame the same question: “What are you going to do about crime?”² A *New York Times* article about Beame’s campaigning upstate noted, “As if to confirm his assessment of the crime issue, a bather at the Villa Maria’s pool advised him, ‘More policemen—that’s No. 1.’ And a man on the porch at the Villa Vosilla urged him to ‘make it safe to walk the streets.’”³ Beame’s Republican opponent, John Marchi, was also traveling in search of votes in the Catskills. Making stops at the Villaggio Italia in Haines Falls and the police recreation resort in Elka Park, Marchi was barraged with the same concerns about crime and safety: “I have yet to meet a person that doesn’t bring it up,” he said.⁴

Resortgoers remained preoccupied with their neighborhoods back in New York City even while on vacation. Their anxieties were no anomaly; they were the culmination of years of growing concern about crime, racism, unemployment, war,

¹ “Beame and Colorful Entourage Return to Catskills to Campaign,” *New York Times*, September 1, 1973.

² “Beame Finds Most Worry Over Crime,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1973.

³ “Beame Finds Most Worry Over Crime.”

⁴ “Beame and Colorful Entourage Return to Catskills to Campaign.”

and upheaval in urban neighborhoods. Beginning in the mid-1960s, the social and political unrest in New York City and the nation as a whole ensured that politics crept into the carefree, get-away-from-it-all atmosphere carefully cultivated by vacationers and resort owners. Working- and lower-middle class vacationers, in particular, carried urban anxieties and frustrations with them to vacation spots outside the city. This made the Catskills an ideal destination for civil rights organizing and political campaigning. Beame, like other New York City and State politicians, was savvy enough to know this—this was his second trip to the Catskills in as many months.⁵

New York City underwent tremendous changes in the 1960s and 1970s. The number of manufacturing jobs declined dramatically. As the city shifted towards a service-based economy, the number of manufacturing jobs was cut by more than half between 1960 and 1975.⁶ During the same time period, African Americans and Puerto Ricans continued to experience persistent housing and employment discrimination, disinvestment in their inner-city neighborhoods, and increasing poverty and crime rates. Many landlords shamelessly neglected or abandoned their apartment buildings, refused to pay real estate taxes, or set fire to their buildings in an attempt to profit from insurance money. Banks and insurance companies redlined neighborhoods “unworthy” of investment. In the financial crisis of the

⁵ “Beame Finds Most Worry Over Crime.”

⁶ Liz Sevckenko, “Making Loisaída: Placing Puertorriqueñidad in Lower Manhattan,” in *Mambo Montage: The Latinization of New York*, ed. Agustín Laó-Montes and Arlene Dávila (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 294.

1970s, the city government, on the edge of bankruptcy, cut crucial public services to poor neighborhoods.⁷

The city's population was changing, too. The Hart-Cellar Immigration Act, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965, eased immigration restrictions established by the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act. Italians were one of the primary targets of the national origins quota system established by the 1924 law, and they enthusiastically endorsed the Hart-Cellar Act. Many agreed with the sentiment of Lt. Mario Biaggi, President of the Grand Council of Columbian Associations in Civil Service (and future United States Congressman from the Bronx) when he said, "It's easier to get a Danish housemaid into the United States than it is to get your own mother from Italy."⁸ Yet it was not primarily Italians who immigrated to New York after the law went into effect. A wave of new immigrant populations began arriving in the city, dramatically different from the wave at the turn of the twentieth century. Rather than being from European countries, they now came primarily from Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean.⁹

The combined weight of these changes contributed to escalating tensions between the many different ethnic and racial groups living in New York City. African Americans and Puerto Ricans grew increasingly frustrated with their

⁷ "Making Loisaida," 294-295.

⁸ "Johnson Urges Immigration Reform," *Italo-American Times*, February 1965. Biaggi, a conservative Democrat from the Bronx, served as a United States Congressman from 1969 to 1988. In 1973, he declared his candidacy for New York City Mayor but his candidacy unraveled in a scandal. Abraham Beame would go on to win the election.

⁹ Nancy Foner, ed. *New Immigrants in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 2.

neglected neighborhoods, housing discrimination, competition with new immigrants for jobs and resources, and decreasing quality of life. Puerto Ricans were hit particularly hard, because they were mostly employed in the kinds of unskilled labor and blue-collar jobs that were leaving the city. The optimism and aspirations for upward mobility many felt in the 1950s faded rapidly in the next two decades, as employment opportunities shrank.¹⁰ African American losses in manufacturing work were offset by gains in public employment during the same time period, but this provided small comfort in light of the many other challenges they faced.¹¹

Young African Americans and Puerto Ricans, disillusioned by the slow pace of change, grew increasingly radicalized. Patience and moderation no longer seemed like effective means of uprooting deeply entrenched economic and social injustices, and many rejected the more moderate tactics employed by their parents' generation. Continued social, political, and economic marginalization pushed them to undertake more radical efforts to mobilize their communities and force change. The civil rights movement grew increasingly radicalized, as expressions of Black Power resonated with younger generations of African Americans inspired by organizations like the Black Panther Party. Young Puerto Ricans who were born and raised in American cities found inspiration in Puerto Rican nationalist organizations like the Young Lords, which was modelled on the Black Panther Party.

¹⁰ Matthew Gandy, *Concrete and Clay: Reworking Nature in New York City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 159; *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 215.

¹¹ Andres Torres, *Between Melting Pot and Mosaic: African Americans and Puerto Ricans in the New York Political Economy* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 86-88.

As African Americans and Puerto Ricans moved beyond a focus on legal equality toward demands for social and economic justice, working- and middle-class white ethnic New Yorkers grew increasingly defensive.¹² White ethnics who still lived in the city were frustrated and alarmed by the changes in their neighborhoods, and many associated growing crime rates with the city's growing black and Puerto Rican populations.¹³ For white ethnic residents of neighborhoods like Canarsie, Brooklyn, "The basic fact of life . . . was the precariousness of their hold on middle-class status, the recency of their arrival in that exalted position, and the intense fear that it might be taken from them."¹⁴ White ethnic New Yorkers' anxieties propelled their resistance to change. Throughout the 1960s, white ethnics forcefully pushed back against residential and school integration, as well as efforts to break ethnic holds on union membership.¹⁵ At the same time that "*their whiteness* became increasingly salient in . . . black-white conflicts," white ethnics consciously drew upon on the group-based language of the Civil Rights movement to assert their ethnic distinctiveness.¹⁶ In the 1960s and 1970s, Italian American New Yorkers' sense of ethnic identity was reinvented and reinforced, in part, through these

¹² *Canarsie*, 96.

¹³ *White Ethnic New York*, 147, 155.

¹⁴ *Canarsie*, 96.

¹⁵ Examples include white resistance to the desegregation of construction jobs in 1963; apprenticeship programs were known to practice nepotism, and ethnic unions remained well into the post-World War II period in New York City. See Freeman, "The Persistence and Demise of Ethnic Union Locals in New York City after World War II," 196-199.

¹⁶ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 20-22.

neighborhood struggles. Ethnic revival and white backlash politics went hand-in-hand.

The Civil Rights Movement helped give birth to the white ethnic “revival” of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁷ The movement’s language of group identity, group pride, and minority rights fuelled and gave shape to new expressions of Italian, Jewish, and Irish pride. At the same time, city, state, and federal government efforts to improve the lives of racial minorities fuelled white ethnics’ belief in their own mistreatment. Many felt that they, unlike racial minorities, had scraped their way up the social ladder without any government hand-outs or special treatment. This was, of course, untrue. They had benefitted from their whiteness, which ensured that they did not have to worry about discrimination in housing, jobs, and unions, and secured their access to the many New Deal-era federal benefits that were routinely denied to racial minorities.¹⁸ But in an atmosphere of deindustrialization, precarious job security, and rising crime rates, working- and middle-class Italians (and other white ethnics) feared that the few gains they had secured could quickly slip away from them.

In previous decades, politics seemed largely absent from resort life in the Catskills. In the 1960s and 1970s, social organizing and political campaigning became increasingly visible. The primary functions of the resorts were still apolitical, of course; vacationers still came to bask in the sunshine, walk in the woods, swim in the pool, and dance the night away. But the influence of civil rights

¹⁷ *Roots Too*, 19.

¹⁸ See *When Affirmative Action Was White*, Chapter 5, “White Veterans Only.”

activism, black and Puerto Rican radicalism, white ethnic revival, and backlash politics crept into vacationers' rhetoric as they grew increasingly frustrated and angry. Catskills resorts *did* remain refuges from the stresses and strains of urban life for racial and ethnic minorities. But politics and leisure are not easily separated. African American, Puerto Rican, and Italian resorts offered vacationers insular, "safe" spaces in which they could express their thoughts on integration, civil rights, and group pride, and actively organize and campaign for change.

The Politics of Recreational Space

African American and Puerto Rican protest in the urban North took an increasingly militant tack in the mid-1960s. Racial minorities' frustrations, expressed in a string of riots in urban areas beginning in the mid-1960s, went much deeper than the legal barriers to upward mobility that were the focus of the Southern Civil Rights movement. Instead, it emerged from the entrenched social and economic inequalities that structured the everyday lives of urban poor and working-class racial minorities—from housing discrimination, to police brutality, to discrimination in manufacturing jobs.¹⁹

These inequalities were exacerbated by postwar deindustrialization in northern cities, which had a devastating impact on Puerto Ricans and African Americans who had migrated to Northern cities with the expectation of finding manufacturing work. Instead, industrial jobs were being shed as a result of technological improvements and manufacturing companies' cost-cutting flight to

¹⁹ *White Ethnic New York*, 146.

suburban areas and southern states.²⁰ Northern urban minorities' rising expectations, born of the postwar economic boom and federal civil rights victories, collided head-on with new urban realities in the mid-1960s: deindustrialization, white flight, crumbling urban neighborhoods, deeply entrenched racism, and police brutality.

Young radicals in organizations including the Black Panthers and the Young Lords sought to channel poor urban racial minorities' frustration and anger into organizing for radical change.²¹ The Black Panther Party was founded in 1966 as a revolutionary organization that sought to organize poor urban black people around ideas of self-determination, access to employment and adequate housing, and freedom from police brutality.²² The Black Panthers provided a model for the formation, in 1968, of a Puerto Rican radical nationalist organization in Chicago called the Young Lords. In 1969, a group of Puerto Rican first-generation college students in New York City founded a New York chapter of the organization. The members of the Young Lords were primarily first- and second-generation Puerto Rican youths, but there was considerable overlap between African American and Puerto Rican radical activism. Many members of New York's Young Lords

²⁰ *White Ethnic New York*, 148-149; Johanna Fernandez, "Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics: The Young Lords, Late Sixties Radicalism, and Community Organizing in New York City," in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 259.

²¹ Johanna Fernandez, "The Young Lords and the Social and Structural Roots of Late Sixties Urban Radicalism," in *Civil Rights in New York City: From World War II to the Giuliani Era*, ed. Clarence Taylor (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), 146.

²² "Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics," 255-56.

organization had previous interest or involvement in black nationalist organizations. In addition to often living in the same neighborhoods, “by virtue of its dark and mulatto complexion, a significant section of the Puerto Rican population forms part of the black diaspora and therefore encountered many of the same racial barriers as did black Southerners migrating to Northern cities in the postwar years.”²³ The Young Lords sought self-determination for Puerto Ricans in Puerto Rico and on the mainland, and focused their efforts on community-based organizing. Using a confrontational style similar to the Black Panthers’, they protested for improved health services, trash pickup, housing, and against police brutality, among other efforts to improve the lives of poor and working-class minorities in New York City neighborhoods.²⁴

Residents of poor neighborhoods in New York City faced a disproportionate share of the city’s environmental and health hazards. Landlords and property owners abandoned some of their buildings and subdivided others in an effort to alleviate their tax burden, driving the spread of urban blight throughout the city. The impact on the urban landscape was devastating: “vast areas of Brooklyn and northern Manhattan became wastelands. Boarded-up, empty buildings dotted every block, attracting drug dealers, vagrants, prostitutes, and vandals.”²⁵ Blight also had a devastating impact on the poor minority residents of these neighborhoods.

²³ “Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics,” 257.

²⁴ “Between Social Service Reform and Revolutionary Politics,” 256-262.

²⁵ *White Ethnic New York*, 152-153.

Rampant housing discrimination and poorly paid jobs forced many to live in overcrowded, crumbling, yet expensive, apartments.²⁶

The Young Lords succinctly described the extent of the problem in East Harlem, known as El Barrio: in “the oldest, biggest, filthiest” Puerto Rican slum in New York City, “There is glass sprinkled everywhere, vacant lots filled with rubble, burnt out buildings on nearly every block, and people packed together in the polluted summer heat.”²⁷ One of the first problems tackled by the Young Lords was the city’s neglect of trash pickup in East Harlem. In 1969, the group organized a “garbage offensive” in the neighborhood, forming enormous street barricades of uncollected trash in protest. These environmental problems were exacerbated by the continued out-migration of white New Yorkers to the suburbs and the city’s financial crisis in the 1970s.²⁸

Racial and ethnic minorities’ urban environmental grievances extended to recreational facilities. The ability to access and enjoy outdoor recreational spaces was an inherently political issue for African Americans and Puerto Ricans. New York City government neglected public parks in poor neighborhoods, which were often underfunded and poorly maintained. Racial minorities continued to face discrimination or harassment at urban amusement parks, pools, and other places of

²⁶ *White Ethnic New York*, 153.

²⁷ “El Barrio and YLO Say No More Garbage in Our Community,” from the newspaper *Young Lords Organization*, 1969, volume 1, number 4. Reprinted in Darrel Enck-Wanzer, *The Young Lords: A Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 186.

²⁸ *Working-Class New York*, 185.

public accommodation; the moral suasion tactics favored by state discrimination agencies like SCAD in the 1950s did little to root out intransigent discrimination.

In the 1960s, conflicts over recreational spaces spiked dramatically throughout the United States, as racial minorities increasingly pushed for access to leisure spaces, and whites organized to prevent it. Young minorities were often at the forefront of protests against segregated recreational spaces. The student-led 1960-1961 “wade-ins” at Rainbow Beach in Chicago, organized with the assistance of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), provoked violent responses by white mobs.²⁹ Other recreational protests were more disorganized outbursts, but similarly emerged out of years of frustration. In May 1966, thousands of African American teenagers caused an unorganized disturbance in Brooklyn’s Coney Island amusement park. The teens moved through the concession area, “throwing bottles at civilians and forcing rides and booths to close early.” Some police officers at the scene claimed to hear “anti-white and anti-police shouts from the crowd.”³⁰ The target of the disturbance was no accident; it reflected the resentment and anger African American teenagers felt after years of exclusion and discrimination at the park. As historian Victoria W. Wolcott has noted, in 1964, Steeplechase Park’s final season, management closed the pool altogether to avoid allowing African Americans

²⁹ The wade-ins also spurred massive organization by white Chicagoans seeking to prevent them from using the beach, and required a massive police presence. For more about the Rainbow Beach wade-ins, and the response of white Chicagoans to the protests, see *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 174-176; *Concrete and Clay*, 164-166.

³⁰ “4,000 Teen-agers Brawl at Coney,” *New York Times*, May 31, 1966.

in.³¹ This was despite the area surrounding Coney Island having become a predominantly black and Puerto Rican neighborhood by that time. After another conflict in July 1966, the African American Director of the Coney Island Community Family Center, Atkins Preston, explained the brewing discontent: "We've got a large poverty area in the midst of a lot of affluence . . . Every time one of these things happens, the cops go out and sweep up a lot of Negroes. Nothing changes."³²

Racial minorities sought resolutions through conventional political channels, often to no avail. In 1969, New York City Mayor John V. Lindsay sponsored a conference to examine the many challenges facing the city's Puerto Rican community, and to devise a "design for change." The conference included a panel focused on the importance of organized sports and outdoor recreation for Puerto Ricans in New York City. Frank Ortiz, Esq., legal advisor to the National Federation of Softball, reported on the panel's findings and emphasized the necessity of well-maintained recreational spaces for the city's poor residents:

For many in the underprivileged communities, city park facilities are the only recreational area during the summer months. Poor Puerto Ricans cannot fly to exotic places or enjoy expensive cruises. The free recreation provided in the city parks is of prime importance to them. As a practical matter the poor people who keep the wheels of industry grinding and who pay a large portion of taxes, obtain little benefit from Lincoln Center and the great museums. But they can readily enjoy a Sunday or Saturday afternoon at a city park with family and friends.³³

³¹ *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 207.

³² "Coney Fight Brings Complaints on Police and Stirs Civic Fears," *New York Times*, July 14, 1966.

³³ *Puerto Ricans Confront Problems of the Complex Urban Society: A Design for Change*, Community conference proceedings (New York: Office of the Mayor, 1967).

Ortiz detailed specific problems: "No fences; dangerous conditions; no toilet facilities; no grandstands; no night games; inadequate water fountains; inadequate provision for control of littering; inadequate police protection; no indoor facilities for track and field events are available."³⁴ But the conference also illuminated the limitations of working through traditional political channels. Ortiz lamented that no representatives from the Department of Parks had participated in the panel. "Perhaps a lot of our grievances might have been answered if they had participated," he added.³⁵

White New Yorkers viewed these circumstances differently. Compared to other white urban northerners in the 1950s and early 1960s, New York's white ethnic population was largely indifferent to the civil rights movement.³⁶ By the late 1960s, working- and lower-middle-class white ethnics' attitudes changed dramatically for the worse because of demographic changes in their neighborhoods, racial minorities' growing assertiveness, and their own economic unease as the city shifted to manufacturing to a service-based economy. Many white New Yorkers were unable to see the complex forces driving the creation of inner-city ghettos.³⁷ They increasingly blamed the rampant poverty, growing crime, and blight on the supposed laziness and inherent criminality of poor black and Puerto Rican New

³⁴ *Puerto Ricans Confront Problems of the Complex Urban Society*, 86.

³⁵ *Puerto Ricans Confront Problems of the Complex Urban Society*, 85.

³⁶ *White Ethnic New York*, 144.

³⁷ *White Ethnic New York*, 155.

Yorkers.³⁸ The shift was compounded by the increasing activism and militance of the city's racial and ethnic minorities.

White New Yorkers also blamed African Americans and Puerto Ricans for the decline of urban amusements and city parks. They overlooked the reality that urban recreational spaces had long thrived among white customers *because of* the active exclusion of racial minorities.³⁹ Victoria W. Wolcott rightly argues that the broader urban unrest of the 1960s “shifted the national conversation about recreational access from one of racial justice to one of racial culpability.”⁴⁰ Many whites now identified violent black youths as the primary problem facing urban amusements, rather the discriminatory, exclusive conditions those youths decried. White city residents responded by abandoning urban amusements—and the city itself—in droves.

Summer resorts usually offered a refuge from these tensions over urban space that continued to escalate between the city's ethnic and racial minorities. A healthy environment and safe recreational spaces were still in high demand among New Yorkers, especially those on the economic margins. By the 1970s, African American, Italian, and Puerto Rican resorts all catered to large numbers of working- and lower-middle-class vacationers. Peg Leg Bates appealed to these residents directly in a 1972 advertisement for his resort's picnic area, announcing that the resort had “all the clear, clean unpolluted air you can breathe.”⁴¹ The mountain

³⁸ *White Ethnic New York*, 147.

³⁹ *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 225.

⁴⁰ *Race, Riots, and Roller Coasters*, 194.

⁴¹ Advertisement in the *New York Amsterdam News*, April 22, 1972.

resorts also remained appealing as racially and ethnically homogeneous recreational spaces. White New Yorkers saw the resorts as spaces untainted by the crime and racial conflict that plagued urban amusement places like Coney Island and Atlantic City. But vacationers' fears and frustrations followed them on vacation, ensuring that the resorts were not always immune from the social and political turmoil of the time.

Civil Rights in the Catskills

Leisure and politics were always intertwined at African American resorts. In a 1993 oral history interview, Peg Leg Bates claimed that he had gradually won respect for himself and his resort with white locals in Kerhonkson through persistence and professionalism, not militance. We "won them over," he said, "not by demonstrating, fighting, and carrying on, we just showed them that we was as good as they are . . ." ⁴² The reality was a bit more complicated. As the products of discrimination, African American resorts provided spaces for African American professionals to relax and socialize, but also to network, organize, and fight for change. In 1966, the political function of black resorts became overt when Peg Leg Bates Country Club became an important site of civil rights activism and black power.

In early December 1966, Peg Leg Bates Country Club hosted a meeting of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC was born out the actions of four black college students who, on February 1, 1960, staged a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. The protest

⁴² Bates, interview, CD #5 of 6.

touched off student sit-ins throughout the South in the following months. Many of the students who participated in these protests recognized the need for an organization to coordinate student civil rights activism, and in April 1960, they formed SNCC at a conference in Raleigh, North Carolina. SNCC became integral to the Southern civil rights movement in the 1960s, with members participating in voter registration projects, the 1961 Freedom Rides to desegregate interstate travel facilities throughout the South, and the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, among others.⁴³

SNCC underwent a significant shift in the mid-1960s, following the passage of two pieces of Civil Rights legislation. The 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination in public accommodations, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act gave the federal government the power to supervise voter registrations and elections in the South, as well as outlawing literacy tests for voting. Despite these civil rights victories at the federal level, SNCC members grew increasingly militant, inspired by urban uprisings by black people throughout the country.⁴⁴ This militant shift became increasingly evident in 1966 with the launch of SNCC's "Atlanta Project," which focused on community organizing and community control in Atlanta's black neighborhoods. Many of the Atlanta Project's members were from urban areas in

⁴³ For in-depth examinations of the history of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, see Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) and Faith S. Holsaert, Martha Prescod, Norman Noonan, Judy Richardson, Betty Garman Robinson, Jean Smith Young, and Dorothy M. Zellner, eds., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁴⁴ *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 526.

Northern states where they were influenced by Black Nationalist organizations and pan-Africanist thought. They quickly distanced themselves from SNCC leadership and from the organization's integrationist history. According to SNCC historian Clayborne Carson, "promoted black separatism with a singular fervor."⁴⁵ At a March 1966 staff meeting, Atlanta Project members presented a position paper arguing that SNCC needed to be an all-black organization if it wanted to be successful in relating to and organizing black people. They believed that white staff members should focus instead on organizing poor whites against racism: "How can one clean up someone else's yard when one's own yard is untidy?"⁴⁶ While most SNCC members disagreed with the strict separatism advocated by Atlanta Project members and the divisive means by which they promoted their beliefs, many still found their core arguments compelling. The March 1966 meeting planted the seeds for what was to come at Peg Leg Bates Country Club.

Stokely Carmichael replaced John Lewis as SNCC chair in May 1966 at a staff retreat in Kingston Springs, Tennessee. This leadership change furthered the shift toward black power ideology and the focus on urban organizing. In the meantime, the Atlanta Project continued to press for the removal of white staff members from the organization, though by the fall of 1966 there were few whites remaining. The conflict increasingly consumed SNCC, curtailing the organization's ability to function effectively.

⁴⁵ *In Struggle*, 191.

⁴⁶ *In Struggle*, 191-192. Position paper quoted on page 197.

The tensions came to a head in early December 1966, in the now-famous SNCC staff meeting at Peg Leg Bates Country Club. Historians regard this meeting as a pivotal moment in the organization's history, and by extension, in the broader civil rights movement in the mid-1960s. Yet little attention has been paid to the meeting's setting. Bates's resort was an ideal site for the 1966 SNCC meeting. Held in the middle of winter, the resort's location ensured a private, secluded retreat where members could confront the pressing issues facing their organization.⁴⁷ This privacy was, of course, facilitated by the segregated nature of the resort landscape. As a black-owned resort, Peg Leg Bates Country Club provided a space where the one hundred SNCC members who attended the meeting could congregate privately, without fears of unwelcome interference.

SNCC officers slated the question of white membership for discussion on the first day of the meeting, thinking they would be able to quickly move onto other issues. Instead, the debate surrounding the status of the organization's remaining white members lasted several days.⁴⁸ The meeting's tone was acrimonious.

Longtime SNCC member Judy Richardson recalled:

I remember going to dinner with Ivanhoe [Donaldson] and some other people one night while at Peg Leg Bates, and when we came back there was marauding going on from SNCC staff people. Mainly Atlanta SNCC staff people. Somebody had broken down somebody's door. . . . it was not always sunshine and light at staff meetings—people could get really, really mad at each other. . . . But, we never, generally did not let that get in the way of how do you get black people registered to vote without getting them killed, for example. . . . because we knew . . .

⁴⁷ Bob Zellner and Constance Curry, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek: A White Southerner in the Freedom Movement* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2008), 292.

⁴⁸ *In Struggle*, 239-240.

we were responsible for not just our own lives but other peoples' lives. So, you didn't let little stuff get in the way. What I found when I got to Peg Leg Bates' [was] this new kind of violence and personal stuff, and the personal connected with politics, like you know, you're not black enough, you're not militant enough . . . ⁴⁹

This was Richardson's last SNCC staff meeting. She noted that before the Peg Leg Bates retreat, "I had never been afraid before. I was afraid at that meeting."⁵⁰

Richardson's fear was twofold; she was afraid, she said, both "for myself and for the organization."⁵¹

There is considerable disagreement about the meeting's final outcome, even among those who were there. Some say that the vote expelled SNCC's remaining seven white members, others say that they were told to form a separate organization, and still others believe that they were given restricted power within SNCC.⁵² According to SNCC historian Clayborne Carson, a resolution to exclude the remaining white members finally came to a vote at 2 a.m. The final tally indicated nineteen members for the resolution and eighteen against, with twenty-four abstaining (the seven white staff members present all abstained from the vote). All of the other staff members had gone to bed, or left the meeting altogether.⁵³

Despite disagreement over the meaning and content of the vote, many SNCC staffers with deep roots within the organization were dismayed by the outcome.

⁴⁹ Judy Richardson, phone interview by author, February 24, 2014.

⁵⁰ Richardson, interview.

⁵¹ *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 365.

⁵² In *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, the editors write: "This book's contributors disagree on whether or not the final decision at that meeting was to expel or keep white staff, limit their powers within the organization, or require them to form their own organization." *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 527.

⁵³ *In Struggle*, 241.

For Richardson, the meeting “affirmed for me that this was no longer ‘my’ SNCC.”⁵⁴ Mexican-American staff member Maria Varela saw the meeting as a pivotal turning point in which the organization underwent “a fundamental transformation from an organization that valued participatory democracy and was driven by local community work to one driven by ideology.” She added, “In my view, many of the cultural nationalists who had pushed the issue were notorious in the organization for their inability to do anything—but talk.”⁵⁵ Others saw value in the vote on white membership. SNCC staff member Gloria House argued that it was an important step in self-determination for black people. But she believed the resolution was not to expel white members, but rather to have them “work only in white communities or in our offices”: “How could we send white organizers to black sharecroppers to convince them we could be self-determining as a race? We thought this was an obvious contradiction that had to be corrected”.⁵⁶

In the months following the meeting at Peg Leg Bates Country Club, disagreements over white membership continued to plague SNCC. Internal conflicts hobbled the organization. But even as the organization became less effective in direct action, it became increasingly influential in furthering African American political thought. Under Stokely Carmichael’s leadership, SNCC helped bring black power and its associated focus on Northern urban poverty to the forefront of civil rights protest in the 1960s and 1970s.

⁵⁴ *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 365.

⁵⁵ *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 568.

⁵⁶ *Hands on the Freedom Plow*, 512.

For Peg Leg Bates, the SNCC meeting represented a personal loss.

Richardson recalled that Atlanta Project members had done considerable damage to his property. SNCC leadership left with “a *big* bill to pay. Because we had done so much damage. . . . I remember people talking about, you know, that we owed this man [Peg Leg Bates] money . . . He was *not happy* that we had done damage to his property.”⁵⁷ Despite this debacle, Bates continued to offer the resort as a space for political events. Two years later, in 1968, the *New York Amsterdam News* reported that United States Senator Jacob Javits opened his reelection campaign at Peg Leg Bates Country Club. Bates used the opportunity to inform Javits of the New York State Thruway Authority’s charter bus ban prohibiting buses from using Thruway rest areas on weekends. The ban directly impacted his guests; by the late 1960s, most were coming to his resort by charter bus. Speaking before a crowd of an estimated 2,300 people, Javits addressed the ban directly, promising that he would speak with Governor Nelson Rockefeller in an effort to lift the ban. The newspaper noted that Javits “was presented with petitions bearing almost 10,000 names of persons who protested what they charged was ‘rank discrimination.’”

Bates’s decision to host these kinds of events was not simply an economic calculation. They were not merely opportunities for him to make money by hosting a large group in the off-season or bringing in a large crowd of people to a political event. It represented the same political impulse that drove black resort owners to hire young African Americans who were saving to go to college, or make a collective donation to the NAACP, or sponsor a Harlem youth basketball team. It reflected

⁵⁷ Richardson, interview.

their belief that as prosperous black businessmen and women, they had a moral responsibility to contribute to the betterment of the black community and “give back” where and when they could. He may not have engaged directly in “demonstrating, fighting, and carrying on,” but he willingly provided a space for these activities at a pivotal moment, when African American activism was taking a militant turn in the mid-1960s.

In 1965, the growing discontent and militancy of Puerto Ricans from New York City grew increasingly apparent at Las Villas in Plattekill. These tensions came to head on July 4, when cars driven by two men from the Bronx, Harold Romero, 25, and Serge Montes, 29, collided on Route 32 between Villa El Nilo and Villa Victoria. Romero’s son, 15-month-old Jose Ramon Romero, was killed in the accident. A large crowd of Puerto Rican vacationers quickly surrounded the car crash, presumably to help the victims. The local police had difficulty making their way through the crowd to the scene of the accident, and they made the remarkably misguided decision to call out the Plattekill Fire Department to restrain them—with fire hoses. According to the local newspaper, the crowd responded angrily by throwing rocks at the firefighters. The police claimed that “the streams of water [were] trained on the pavement,” and it was only when the water “splashed on some of the spectators, they grabbed the firemen with the hose and started throwing rocks.”⁵⁸

The next day, a New York State Police investigation was opened “to obtain a general picture of existing conditions in the Puerto Rican summer resort section of

⁵⁸ *Highland Mid-Hudson Post*, July 8, 1965. Elizabeth Werlau, *Plattekill*, 92.

Plattekill . . . from the point of view of riot potential.”⁵⁹ The investigation report gave a more direct summary of the incident: one fireman, 62 year-old Lester Upright of Plattekill, had difficulty clearing the area around the accident and resorted to “spray[ing] the people with the firehose” (not “trained on the pavement,” as the newspaper reported). In response, many members of the crowd, outraged by Upright’s actions, responded by throwing rocks at him.

Firehoses being used to restrain a crowd of minorities on the orders of local white police: although it went unmentioned in the local press, the incident undoubtedly called to mind the use of fire hoses on civil rights protesters in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Footage and images of those events had been broadcast across the nation, and were surely known by most of the people present. Although the intent, scale, and context of the incident differed from the sickening tactics employed by Bull Connor’s police force in Birmingham, the dehumanizing intentions behind the decision were not. This was not lost on Puerto Ricans in Plattekill. A former Plattekill Chief Constable told State Police investigators that “one discernable difference in the attitude of the people was their frequent reference to their ‘civil rights,’” which “he felt . . . was commensurate with the national change in attitude by certain groups.”⁶⁰ The State Police’s description of the vacationers, and the vacationers’ response to the car accident, suggest that many

⁵⁹ Investigation report into the riot potential of Plattekill’s Puerto Rican summer resort section, document 113-198-1, acc. A0795-80, box 54, New York State Division of State Police, Non-Criminal Investigation Case Files, New York State Archives, Cultural Education Center, Albany, NY (hereafter cited as Non-Criminal Investigation Case Files).

⁶⁰ Investigation report into the riot potential of Plattekill’s Puerto Rican summer resort section, Non-Criminal Investigation Case Files.

Puerto Ricans felt the same anger and frustration towards law enforcement officials in Plattekill that they felt in New York City, where police brutality was common.⁶¹ Despite being on vacation, Puerto Ricans in Plattekill were confronted with many of the same stereotypes, persecution, and intimidation that they had long experienced in New York City. In response, they demanded the right to be treated with respect and dignity, and to enjoy their vacations free from the harassment of the local police.

Although the New York State Police's investigation was prompted by the July 4th accident, it was merely the latest incident in a long, tense relationship between local residents and Puerto Rican vacationers. Young Puerto Ricans in New York City grew increasingly frustrated in the 1960s and 70s, and became more vocal about the racism and other injustices they experienced in their urban neighborhoods. Deindustrialization and racism had taken a devastating toll on their lives; over the course of the decade, family incomes dropped significantly, unemployment rose, and more families were living in poverty.⁶² These shifts, along with an "intensifying sense of disempowerment," fueled their increasing militancy and demands for self-determination in New York City and Puerto Rico.⁶³ Puerto Ricans vacationing in Plattekill increasingly drew upon the same resistance strategies and language of civil rights and Puerto Rican nationalism that they employed in protesting their mistreatment in New York City.

⁶¹ "The Young Lords and the Social and Structural Roots of Late Sixties Urban Radicalism," 147.

⁶² *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 216.

⁶³ *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 203, 221.

White Plattekill residents' anger also surged in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. Many believed that they were being subjected to a kind of mass hit-and-run raid by poor, unruly Puerto Rican day-trippers: "They come for the day, scatter their litter and pick our fruit, and then they go back to their city tenements saying what a great time they had in the country."⁶⁴ Again, the busloads of vacationers were blamed. A guard at Villa Galicia told a journalist that Villa El Nilo had "too damn many buses . . . That's when you get trouble. If I worked there, I would insist on hazardous-duty pay, like in the army."⁶⁵ Wilfrido Castillo, Jr., estimated that El Nilo was serving roughly twenty-five busloads of people at a time.⁶⁶ Another resident suggested that locals

. . . liked the idea that there would be some [vacationers], but that they would be accommodated on the properties of those villas. Once it got outside of the properties and clogged up the roads and people were walking all over the place, and fights were breaking out, it sort of became like a war zone, a disaster area. And so . . . in order to change the direction of what was going on . . . [the police] started handing out tickets and towing cars. Anybody that was off the property that was drunk or this or that, they started making arrests.⁶⁷

Local residents' militaristic analogies (with language referencing "hazardous-duty pay," a "war zone," and an "invasion") reflected and guided, law enforcement's response. Things escalated even more when, in 1970, the Town of Plattekill decided to further subdue the unwieldy, rowdy villa business. In a dramatic show of force, a courthouse was established in the hamlet of Plattekill. A bungalow colony owner in the hamlet of Modena (one of the five Hamlets in the Town of Plattekill) donated a

⁶⁴ "Villa Hopping in the 'Puerto Rican Alps.'"

⁶⁵ "Villa Hopping in the 'Puerto Rican Alps.'"

⁶⁶ Castillo, Jr., interview.

⁶⁷ Anonymous Plattekill resident, interview.

bungalow to house the courthouse, and George Sisti Jr., the Plattekill supervisor, donated a plot of land.⁶⁸ The purpose was, according to one resident, “so that they didn’t have to go so far to bring people in. . . . Because before that, they had to transport them to Modena, and Modena was not particularly happy” about that arrangement.⁶⁹ The central function of the courthouse was no secret—indeed, a local newspaper article from August 1972 made their intentions quite clear. Despite its’ misleading headline, “Plattekill Eyes Holiday Weekend,” the article did not focus on the resort festivities planned for Labor Day weekend. It instead described the preparations being made by the Town’s part-time police force to contain the massive influx of unruly weekend visitors. The courthouse, the article noted, served “double functions”—it was “both a traffic court and communications center for police.”⁷⁰

Constable Ed Wager’s memoirs confirm that police grew increasingly aggressive in policing the resorts, and were openly dismissive of vacationers’ basic rights. Wager described the process by which “the police got the upper hand” over vacationers:

⁶⁸ The year is approximate; according to a 1972 article in a local newspaper, the courthouse was established in Plattekill “three years ago.” “Plattekill Eyes Holiday Weekend,” [newspaper unknown], August 24, 1972; article courtesy of the Office of the Plattekill Town Historian.

⁶⁹ Anonymous Plattekill resident, interview.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, the article also noted that the Plattekill Tavern Owners Association, composed almost entirely of Puerto Rican resort and tavern owners, donated a gold-lettered sign to the courthouse that identified the building as the “Plattekill Court of Special Sessions.” It seems that the Puerto Rican resort and tavern owners went out of their way to ingratiate themselves with the local community, but with varying degrees of success. “Plattekill Eyes Holiday Weekend.”

No matter what they did we hand cuffed them and took them to jail. Some weekends we transported 40 or 50 to jail. After awhile the police would not back down. . . . they found out if they came to Rome they had to live like Rome did. If they had the money they paid their fines, if they did not have they went to jail. The Sheriff's Department in Kingston would call us from their department and ask us not to bring any more prisoners. Even their bullpen was filled up.⁷¹

Based on Wager's description, the police clearly abused their power at the expense of the vacationer's rights. The vacationers responded in kind, increasingly resisting or fighting back against police harassment in Plattekill. Wager himself noted that "they had sweatshirts made and on the back in big black letters 'be aware of the Plattekill Gestapo.'"

There were no supermarkets, no movie theaters, and almost no businesses at all in the hamlet of Plattekill. Unlike in other towns, few local residents saw the need to grudgingly accept or accommodate the resorts, because they provided almost no benefit to (nonexistent) local business. The one local white, non-Puerto Rican resident willing to vocally defend the villas in the local press was George Sisti, who happened to own the hamlet's one general store. But Sisti was not the only interested party to profit off of the resorts. The town itself certainly saw a financial benefit from bringing in the court and fining vacationers for various violations. Wager noted that the town learned how to make money off of the many vacationers they arrested. When cars broke down or parked illegally, they were towed to the garage of Lou Fellows ("Good business for him.") Buses were parked at the firehouse ("The fire dept. made money on this.") And the more arrests the constables made, the more money the town brought in:

⁷¹ "My Life History."

Some of the fines were big four + five hundred dollars. We the town put a stop sign at the intersection of Route 32, if they did not stop they were arrested, the town made out on this. We arrested them that did not stop by the dozens. The town got a certain amount of money from the fines.⁷²

Another interviewee confirmed Wager's assessment: "Absolutely, it was a big moneymaker. A tremendous moneymaker. . . . no two ways about it."⁷³

Politics were inseparable from daily life at Las Villas. Unlike African American and Italian resorts, nearly all of the Puerto Rican resorts were clustered in one small hamlet, and most very close together. Almost all were within walking distance of one another, facilitating guests' travel on foot from one place to the next. The huge numbers of buses that descended on the small hamlet every weekend further contributed to the congestion. One policeman told a local newspaper reporter, "sometimes one villa alone will take as many as 20 buses with 50 people on each bus. Besides the buses you have a lot of visitors coming up by car." In a town with a population of 4,700, the weekends drew enough vacationers to be "equivalent to three more Plattekills."⁷⁴ This created a whole host of legitimate grievances: traffic was snarled by hundreds of automobiles and thousands of pedestrians who clogged roadways and parked illegally throughout the town, drunk and often rowdy day-trippers frequently trespassed onto local residents' property as they made their way from villa to villa, and local resources were stretched thin as the town struggled to absorb a huge increase in population each summer weekend.

⁷² "My Life History."

⁷³ Anonymous Plattekill resident, interview.

⁷⁴ "Plattekill Eyes Holiday Weekend."

As local officials stepped up law enforcement efforts directed primarily at Puerto Rican visitors, Puerto Ricans rightly felt that these efforts were often tinged with the same racism and police brutality that they had experienced in their urban neighborhoods, and which they sought to escape in visiting Las Villas. The State Police's insistence on referring repeatedly to Puerto Ricans' supposed "aggressive awareness . . . of their 'civil rights'" (always in quotation marks) trivialized vacationers' very real grievances. They failed to understand the historical conditions that provoked their outrage and resistance to equally aggressive law enforcement officials. Outbursts like the one took place on the July 4th weekend in 1965 may have seemed random and lawless to local residents, but they were in fact a direct response to and protest against perceived lawlessness and brutality of Plattekill law enforcement officials.⁷⁵

Campaigning in the Catskills

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Catskill Mountain resort area also served a more formal political function, as a backdrop for city and state political campaigns. City politicians recognized the immense value of campaigning in the Catskills. The resorts made for lively photo ops and colorful newspaper reports as politicians gladdened with vacationers lounging poolside. More importantly, the resorts offered politicians large audiences of city residents grouped by race and ethnicity. Even as

⁷⁵ In 1966 and 1967, the same conditions would touch off much more dramatic riots by Puerto Ricans in East New York and East Harlem in response to police shootings of unarmed Puerto Ricans. "The Young Lords and the Social and Structural Roots of Late Sixties Urban Radicalism," 147.

national attention focused on the growing antagonism between white and black Americans, New Yorkers continued to divide along ethnic, religious, *and* racial lines.⁷⁶ Politicians took advantage of this fact in their tours of summer resorts. As they campaigned through the mountains, they tailored their messages and campaign promises to the hopes, fears, and needs of each group.⁷⁷

During the 1965 New York City mayoral campaign, candidate John V. Lindsay made campaign stops at Italian, Spanish, and Puerto Rican resorts in Plattekill.⁷⁸ Lindsay's visit to Spanish and Puerto Rican resorts received generous news coverage. Lindsay said he believed "in going to the people wherever they may be including where they spend their vacation time."⁷⁹ Villa Nueva manager Luis Entrialga, reflecting back Lindsay's Plattekill campaigning, was a bit more direct in his assessment: "Mr. Lindsay is a smart politician," he told a reporter. "He knows which side his bread is buttered on."⁸⁰ Puerto Ricans represented sizable portion of

⁷⁶ Joshua M. Zeitz notes that in New York, "what stands out about the period between 1945 and 1970 is the surprising degree to which ethnicity retained a central place in the city's cultural, social, and political landscape." *White Ethnic New York*, 7.

⁷⁷ "Javits Promises Fight On Charter Bus Ban," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 28, 1968.

⁷⁸ Plattekill was no stranger to these political visits, and Las Villas received a steady stream of politicians visiting the resorts throughout the 1960s. In 1964, a group of 50 Puerto Rican politicians and other dignitaries visited the Town of Plattekill. It was a symbolic, goodwill visit; the town was chosen as a stop on their trip to the United States because it was "representative of an area in which many Puerto Rican citizens reside." The resorts had become a source of pride for New York's Puerto Rican community, and they were eager to show them off to the visiting dignitaries. "Officials From Puerto Rico Due In County Today," June 9, 1964, *Kingston Daily Freeman*.

⁷⁹ "Lindsay Visits Plattekill," *Highland Mid-Hudson Post*, August 26, 1965.

⁸⁰ "Villa Hopping in the 'Puerto Rican Alps,'" *New York Times*, September 26, 1971.

New York City's population, and Lindsay needed their support to win. He could not afford to omit them from his campaigning tour of the Catskills. Lindsay, a Congressman from New York's Seventeenth Congressional District, was an elite, Yale-educated, white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Republican "in a city that was largely Catholic and Jewish, Irish and Italian, black and Puerto Rican"—and overwhelmingly Democratic. His Democratic opponent, Abraham Beame, seemed a shoe-in.⁸¹

Entrialga was right—although Puerto Ricans' had not played decisive roles in earlier elections, Lindsay's efforts to court minority voters paid off.⁸² His efforts to reach out to the city's racial minorities and his campaign promise to reverse the city's decline resonated with many New Yorkers. In the 1965 election, "Disaffection with their limited gains under the Democrats, and attraction to Lindsay's strong civil rights record, led more than four out of ten black voters and a quarter of Puerto Rican voters to back the liberal Republican candidate, giving him his margin of victory."⁸³ As Mayor, Lindsay garnered a reputation for being attentive to the needs of the city's black and Latino residents, and working to address their concerns.⁸⁴

Although Lindsay's minority outreach efforts worked in the short term, they caused him grief during his first term in office. "Law and order" language and white

⁸¹ Vincent J. Cannato, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 19.

⁸² According to Joshua B. Freeman, "Low levels of voter registration and geographic dispersion meant that well into the 1960s, Puerto Ricans had very little clout in electoral politics." *Working-Class New York*, 193.

⁸³ *Working-Class New York*, 193 and 209.

⁸⁴ *Puerto Rican Citizen*, 218. Lindsay had developed this reputation even before he became mayor; as a Congressman representing New York's Seventeenth Congressional District (known as the "Silk Stocking District"), Lindsay was a staunch supporter of civil rights laws, and helped pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act. *The Ungovernable City*, 11.

backlash had been increasingly evident at both the local and national level in the mid-1960s. In the 1964 presidential campaign between Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson, Goldwater preyed on Americans' fears of growing crime rates, urban riots, and civil unrest in his bid for the presidency. Lindsay, still a Congressman in 1964, was openly critical of Goldwater's tactics, and refused to endorse his candidacy.⁸⁵ But during his first term as New York City Mayor, Lindsay had to face a number of racially-charged controversies that reflected the increasing pervasiveness of law and order sentiments among his white ethnic constituents. These controversies fueled and were fueled by working- and middle-class white ethnics' growing resentment toward civil rights efforts, urban unrest, growing crime rates, and economic uncertainty in the city. Despite Lindsay's 1965 campaign promise to reverse the city's decline, it continued to falter. Many working- and middle-class Italian Americans who still lived in the city grew anxious and angry. They directed their ire toward both racial minorities, who they felt were being given unfair advantages in everything from affirmative action to school integration, and toward "those who enjoyed the immunities of affluence, yet their focus remained on the minority poor."⁸⁶ The description fit Lindsay perfectly.

These tensions erupted in 1966, early in Lindsay's first term, when the Mayor sought to implement his plan to establish a Civilian Complaint Review Board to better address complaints filed against the city's police force and improve relations between the police and minority populations. The July 1964 Harlem Riot was still

⁸⁵ *The Ungovernable City*, 15-17.

⁸⁶ *Canarsie*, 101.

fresh in the minds of New Yorkers, black and white alike. The shooting of fifteen-year old James Powell by a white, off-duty police officer unleashed days of violence and disorder in the city.⁸⁷ Lindsay's effort appealed to the city's minority residents, but the new Mayor faced fierce opposition from white New Yorkers and the Patrolmen's Benevolent Association (PBA). The PBA mounted a strong campaign against the effort and gathered enough petition signatures to place a referendum on the ballot to eliminate civilian membership from the board. White ethnic New Yorkers responded by voting overwhelmingly in support of the referendum.

Italians increasingly marshalled the language of ethnic particularism to express what were largely class-based resentments and fears. An editorial in the Bronx-based *Italo-American Times*, "Thumbs Down on the Civilian Review Board," perfectly summed up the sentiments of many Italians and other white ethnics:

From City Hall, the board allegedly is operating to review police action thereby safeguarding the rights of minority groups. In our opinion, however, it falls far short in providing for minority groups on the panel. Frankly, we mean the Italo-American, the city's largest minority group. Then too, where is the German-American, the Polish-American, the Greek-American, etc. Remember, Mr. Mayor, these are minority groups, too, though admittedly, not as troublesome as others. *Perhaps a riot might insure their representation* [emphasis added].⁸⁸

The newspaper's sharp jab at the city's black residents ignored the conditions that provoked the 1964 Harlem riot and the other urban disorders plaguing the country in the mid-1960s. Equally striking is the way the editorial utilized the group-based language of the Civil Rights Movement ("safeguarding the rights of minority

⁸⁷ *Working-Class New York*, 192.

⁸⁸ "Editorial: Thumbs Down on the Civilian Review Board," *Italo-American Times*, November 1966.

groups”) to express Italian Americans’ grievances toward the Lindsay administration, and liberal reform more broadly. The editors not only denied their own white privilege, but expressed “the politics of white grievance that pitted itself against unfair *black* privilege . . . couched in a Civil Rights language poached from blacks themselves.”⁸⁹

Lindsay lost the support of many white ethnic voters in the wake of the Civilian Complaint Review Board controversy. These losses were soon compounded by a string of other race-related controversies. In 1968, a conflict between black parents and the predominantly white teachers’ union in Brooklyn’s Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district sparked three disruptive citywide strikes.⁹⁰ In 1969, Puerto Rican and African American students shut down City College to demand changes to the system’s curriculum and admissions process.⁹¹ Lindsay’s sympathy for the plight of racial minorities, his efforts to improve their lives, and his seeming disinterest in the concerns of white ethnic New Yorkers, left many Italians feeling snubbed by the administration.

In the 1969 election, Lindsay returned once again to Las Villas where he said “he was received more cordially than he was on a similar tour four years ago.”⁹² But while Lindsay’s popularity was rising among nonwhites, white ethnic voters continued to abandon him, and he lost the Republican Party’s nomination to

⁸⁹ *Roots Too*, 22.

⁹⁰ *White Ethnic New York*, 163.

⁹¹ *Working-Class New York*, 230-231.

⁹² “Lindsay Greeted At Area Resorts,” *Newburgh Evening News*, August 18, 1969.

conservative state senator John Marchi.⁹³ Lindsay managed to win re-election anyway with the help of Democratic voters, running instead on the Liberal Party ticket against Marchi and Democratic candidate Mario Procaccino.

Law and order politics remained a central concern for Italian Americans and other white ethnic New Yorkers four years later, when Democrat Abraham Beame travelled to the Catskills in the “Beamemobile” to campaign in the 1973 mayoral race. If anything, tensions had escalated even further, as crime rates continued to grow, racial and ethnic tensions ran high, and the city inched closer and closer to bankruptcy. Although Beame ultimately won the election, becoming the city’s first Jewish mayor, Italians remained wary of his ability to reverse what they perceived as Mayor Lindsay’s damaging assault on the rights of white ethnics.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Italian Americans vehemently rejected racial minorities’ demands for economic and social equality while absorbing the lessons of black and Puerto Rican nationalism. An editorial in the *Italo-American Times* observed that with the election of Beame, “it’ll be business as usual down at city hall—unless Italos learn the lessons the city’s other major ethnic groups learned a long time ago. One of the principal lessons being that day-to-day militant involvement gets results.”⁹⁴ The sentiments expressed in the *Italo-American Times* demonstrate that the vacationers who harangued Beame about the city’s crime rates

⁹³ Freeman notes that “Lindsay provided a perfect foil for the resentment, fear, and envy of white workers, homeowners, and shopkeepers. His patrician manner and apparent belief that poor blacks and Puerto Ricans had greater claim to government resources than moderately successful whites offended the sense of fairness of many working-class voters.” *Working-Class New York*, 235.

⁹⁴ “Editorial: A Time to Move,” *Italo-American Times*, November-December 1973.

were implicitly expressing a racial and class grievances. The *Italo-American Times* was much more explicit: "The back of the bus is a cheap place for anyone to sit, even Italian-Americans."⁹⁵ The newspaper's appropriation of "back of the bus" language and its support for using militant activism to achieve desired results suggests that Italian Americans were indeed "watching and imitating" their African American and Puerto Rican neighbors.⁹⁶ They drew upon these lessons in their efforts to shore up their racial, ethnic, and class positions, and to police the boundaries between themselves and nonwhite New Yorkers.

Italians did not worry about having to "protect" territorial boundaries and keep out unwanted guests at their resorts. Their sentiments serve as a reminder that "an unintended consequence of the celebration of roots and ethnic place among Euro-Americans . . . is often an implicit comparison between 'good' ethnic places (the small town and inner city ethnic enclave) and 'bad' racial places (the inner city ghetto)."⁹⁷ Far removed from the city, Italian resorts worked to reinforce a sense of Italian identity and provoked vacationers' nostalgia for the old Italian enclaves—segregated neighborhoods that many had left voluntarily for improved housing options in areas on the edges of or outside the city.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ "Editorial: A Time to Move," *Italo-American Times*, November-December 1973.

⁹⁶ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 329.

⁹⁷ *Heritage on Stage*, 234.

⁹⁸ "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People," 317.

Conclusion

Vacations are meant to be getaways, where individuals can take time away from the troubles, cares, and frustrations of their everyday lives. Yet turmoil in New York City and the nation as a whole in the 1960s and 1970s ensured that vacationers' political fears and frustrations followed them from New York City to the Catskills each summer.

At summer resorts, Puerto Ricans and African Americans sought to temporarily escape the blight, discrimination, and police brutality they experienced in their urban neighborhoods. But profiling, discrimination, and harassment know no boundaries. Politics and leisure were inseparable for racial minorities, and they could not avoid these issues even when visiting their own private resorts in the Catskills. Sometimes these concerns were addressed through formal meetings at the resorts held by social and political groups, as in the case of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee meeting at the Peg Leg Bates Country Club. The resort was an ideal site for the civil rights organization to address questions of black power and white membership in a safe and insulated environment. Other times, racial minorities' frustrations erupted into more spontaneous outbursts, like the July 4, 1965 disturbance in Plattekill. Although the protest was unorganized, it was a direct result of Puerto Ricans' belief that they were being unfairly harassed and targeted by Plattekill's white residents.

Italian Americans were also unable to leave behind the frustrations they felt in their urban neighborhoods when they went on vacation. In the midst of New York City's fiscal crisis, Italians and other white ethnic New Yorkers believed that

African American and Puerto Rican demands for social and economic justice, and politicians' attention to those demands, threatened their own tenuous economic and social position. Racial minorities' perceived immorality and criminality, and their encroachment on white ethnic neighborhoods, posed a further threat. Italian New Yorkers used the language of ethnic particularity, group-based rights, and law and order to delineate social and territorial boundaries and express their racial and class grievances. When aspiring mayoral candidates campaigned at Italian resorts in the Catskills, vacationers made these grievances known and demanded solutions.

The politics of leisure came to the Catskills in force in the 1960s and 1970s, and heralded the decline of resort-style vacationing among urban New Yorkers. In the final decades of the twentieth century, the resort landscape fell victim to the same forces driving the city's political and social upheaval, including white ethnics' Americanization (albeit disguised in the language of ethnic revival), suburbanization, intergenerational conflict, and economic uncertainty. In the postwar decades, New Yorkers relished the glamour and social cachet of vacationing at Catskill resorts; at the close of the twentieth century, family vacationing, and the resorts themselves, seemed worn and tired.

CHAPTER 5

“IT’S TIME TO GO”: THE DECLINE OF ETHNIC RESORTS

In the 1970s, African American, Italian, and Puerto Rican resorts continually adapted to meet their clientele’s changing musical, entertainment, and culinary tastes. At Italian resorts, comedians catered to more recent generations of Italian Americans—no longer telling jokes *to* Italian grandmothers, they told jokes *about* Italian grandmothers.¹ As disco grew in popularity, it was increasingly featured in resorts’ entertainment line-ups; by 1977, Sally Walker was advertising an “indoor/outdoor Discotheque” with the “latest disco sounds 7 days a week” and “disco-hustle lessons!”² New immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America discovered the Catskills, and began flocking to African American and Puerto Rican resorts. They brought with them new musical and culinary tastes, and resort owners adapted their offerings to meet these new demands.

African American, Italian, and Puerto Rican resorts all remained popular into the final decades of the twentieth century. Most saw a gradual shift in their client base, as cheap airfare made faraway destinations more affordable to middle-class vacationers. Instead, mountain resorts catered primarily to working-class visitors of all races and ethnicities. The change was most dramatic at African American resorts, which had long catered primarily to an affluent black clientele. By the late 1960s, resorts like Peg Leg Bates Country Club relied heavily on working-class

¹ Marrapodi, interview.

² Paradise Farm advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, July 9, 1977.

vacationers taking day trips upstate. As wealthier vacationers sought destinations farther from home, working-class New Yorkers continued to save a little extra money each summer for an escape to the mountains.

Economic and social changes were underway that threatened the long-term viability of the Catskills resort area. The pace of the decline was uneven, but by the 1990s, almost all ethnic resorts were feeling the pain. A “perfect storm” of forces, in the words of one resort owner, contributed to the dramatic decline of resort-style vacationing in the Catskills in the late twentieth century.³ Suburbanization, backyard swimming pools, and home air conditioning negated the urgency of getting out of the hot, cramped city each summer. Affordable air travel to faraway destinations and modern corporate hotel chains made Catskills resorts seem quaint and outdated. Resort owners’ children had little interest in running their parents’ resorts, and the children and grandchildren of former vacationers had little interest in visiting them. In the final decades of the twentieth century, vacationers abandoned Catskills resorts in droves.

Italian American Resorts

In the 1970s, Italian resorts were sustained briefly by the decade’s ethnic revival, in which later-generation, Americanized Italians (and other white ethnics) sought to sustain or reconnect with their immigrant heritage. At the national level, this revived interest in ethnicity came in part as a response to the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, which prompted public skepticism of unified conceptions of

³ Jim and John Fede, interview by author, Acra, NY, January 15, 2013.

American identity and European Americans' embrace of their Old World heritage.⁴ Yet Italian resorts also remained popular for another, equally important, reason: the Catskills were still an affordable vacation destination for working- and lower-middle-class vacationers.

Italian Americans' revived interest in Italy and Italian heritage and culture was both a blessing and a curse for some resorts. By the late 1960s, resort owners were competing not only for visitors' loyalties, but also with their increased income, and ability to travel farther from home. Affordable airfare made it easier for vacationers to travel long distances, and many Italian Americans seeking to reconnect with the homeland could now see it firsthand. The Bronx-based *Italo-American Times* newspaper featured articles introducing Italian Americans to the different regions of Italy, and the must-see tourist destinations in each.⁵ Italian airline Alitalia also regularly advertised in the newspaper, nudging prospective vacationers with slogans like, "This year, when you go to see your family and friends, see your country, too."⁶ Although not all Italian Americans had family and friends to visit in Italy, the idea of returning to the Italian homeland was still enticing.

The owners of the Villaggio Italia resort saw the writing on the wall. For a little more than a decade, the resort had capitalized on Italians' revived interest in

⁴ *American Crucible*, 333-339; *White Ethnic New York*, 224-225.

⁵ Examples of articles about the different regions of Italy include Gina Vicedomini's articles "Campania," *Italo-American Times*, December 1964, and "Apulia," *Italo-American Times*, January 1965.

⁶ For examples of Alitalia advertisements see *Italo-American Times*, October 1964 and December 1972. The 1974 "see your country, too" advertisement is in the *Italo-American Times*, July 1974.

the Italy and their inability to experience it firsthand. Philip di Belardino said that “When my father saw the [Boeing] 747 come out and deals going to Rome, Paris, and everything, he said ‘It’s time to go . . . People are just going to come weekends, they’re not going to come for two weeks like they used to.’ And he was right.”⁷ The airlines’ cheap flights were of particular concern to a high-end resort like the Villaggio Italia, whose guests were more likely to be able to afford a trip to Italy. In 1972 Alitalia was advertising weeklong “mini tours” to Rome and other destinations; for roughly \$400, vacationers received “air fare, accommodations with private bath, breakfasts, museum pass, rental car for a day (you pay for mileage), welcome cocktails, special dinner, nightclub admission wine tasting, discounts on shopping and meals, coral ‘good luck’ charm and much more!”⁸ The di Belardinos’ efforts to reconstruct images and symbols of the Italian homeland became unnecessary, and even quaint, as vacations to Italy became within reach to many Italian American consumers.

By contrast, a few of the more modest resorts like Pleasant Acres and Acra Manor were likely able to stay in business *because* they catered to a less-affluent clientele. The resorts’ affordability and all-inclusive rates made them an attractive vacation destination for working and lower-middle-class vacationers. They also continued to appeal to urban families. With fears of crime and violence running high in the city, many parents felt safe in the country. Kids could run wild on the resort properties without supervision, giving parents a break in the process. Italian

⁷ di Belardino, interview.

⁸ Alitalia advertisement, *Italo-American Times*, December 1972.

resorts were still Italian-centric, family-friendly, low-cost spaces where visitors could vacation with other Italian Americans. As a result, many remained popular throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and into the 1990s.

Despite the resorts' continued popularity, resort owners recognized that they needed to expand their customer base to survive. The owners of Pleasant Acres continued to cater to Italian Americans but tried to make their resort "American" enough to draw a more diverse crowd. In 1994 Joe Sausto, the resort's third-generation owner, acknowledged that business had become so difficult that "we try to give [customers] what they want, regardless of whether it's Italian or not."⁹ Even Pleasant Acres did not last, however; the resort closed in 2001, "mortally wounded" said Sausto, by "the three A's—air-conditioning, airlines, and assimilation."¹⁰

A few Italian resorts were still in operation in 2014, including Acra Manor, Pollace's in Catskill, Villa Roma in Callicoon, and Villa Vosilla in Tannersville. These resorts managed to carry on in part because of guests who were staunchly loyal to vacationing in the Catskills. When their resort of choice closed, some guests simply sought out other Italian resorts to accommodate them. Augusta Marrapodi described how her extended family, a group of over one hundred people, moved on to the Villa Vosilla when Pleasant Acres closed in 2001: "This is how it went: Pleasant Acres closed, everybody was very sad, and they said, 'We've got to find another Pleasant Acres.' . . . And so cousins did some research to find another place

⁹ Sausto, interview.

¹⁰ "Where Summer Just Isn't What It Used to Be," *New York Times*, July 31, 2002.

that could hold us. And they came up with Villa Vosilla.”¹¹ The Catskills were an ideal meeting place for the family each year—it was nearby, affordable, and the resorts had enough space to accommodate Marrapodi’s large family. Although they were devastated when Pleasant Acres closed, they were unwilling to give up their yearly vacation in the Catskills. They found a sufficient, if not perfect, alternative in Villa Vosilla. For Marrapodi, nothing compared to Pleasant Acres. “It was more than just a place, put it that way,” she said. “It was much more.”¹²

The few remaining Italian resorts constantly adapted, upgraded, and evolved to meet the ever-changing tastes of their clientele, and the needs of their bottom lines. Much of it seemed like trial and error. Acra Manor provides a telling example. When Jim and John Fede took over the business from their parents, Loretta and Val Fede, in the 1980s, they started hosting weddings. In the 1990s they experimented for a few years with staying open during the winter season to cater to the many city guests who head to Hunter Mountain, Windham Mountain, and other nearby ski areas. They enlarged the guest rooms to appeal to guests’ changing expectations for resort hotel accommodations.¹³ The Fede brothers cited tremendous competition from budget cruises and high-end resorts in warmer climates and exotic locales. These industries were run by major corporations and did much higher volume business, so they could afford to give guests more luxurious accommodations for cheaper rates. The brothers observed that amenities that became standard in

¹¹ Marrapodi, interview.

¹² Marrapodi, interview.

¹³ Jim and John Fede, interview.

corporate-run hotels, like flat-screen televisions, were out of reach for their family business. They simply did not have the capital to put a large flat-screen television in all sixty of the resort's guest rooms. Above all, they said, staying in business required hard work. They were frustrated by the challenges of keeping the business open. It was clearly a labor of love.

As with many of the interviews I conducted in the course of my research, my interview with John and Jim Fede, as well my interview with their parents Val and Loretta Fede, had a wistful tone. They were all rightfully proud of the resort's history. Loretta Fede reminded me that the resort was once known as "The House of Stars," because of its reputation for attracting high-end entertainers. At the turn of the twenty-first century, most of the remaining ethnic resorts in the Catskills were working hard to stay in business. The specifically ethnic qualities of the resorts no longer held the attraction that they once did for vacationers from New York City. Resort owners focused on making improvements, upgrades, and adjustments that would bring in not just Italian customers, but any customers at all. The same struggles were evident at ethnic resorts throughout the Catskills resort area.

African American Resorts

In 1962 the *New York Amsterdam News* proclaimed a "friendly rivalry" among black resorts in the Catskills, surmising that the competition would benefit vacationers. It did not, however, benefit smaller black resorts and boarding houses, most of which went out of business by the end of the decade. The change was swift

and dramatic. In July 1960, there were approximately 20 black resorts advertised in the *New York Amsterdam News* vacation section; by 1970, there were half as many.¹⁴

The largest and most well known African American resorts *did* continue to expand dramatically throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s. The black press, which had long documented the goings-on at Catskills resorts in summertime articles and advertisements, now followed the endless stream of improvements, additions, and new activities the remaining resorts offered.¹⁵ In 1969, Bates claimed to have the “best season of its 17-year existence.”¹⁶ In 1970 he added two tennis courts, a driving range, and a mini golf course, and he began advertising his resort with the tagline, “THE RESORT THAT HAS EVERYTHING (almost).”¹⁷ Although larger African American resorts like Peg Leg Bates Country Club saw great success heading into the 1970s, their success was short-lived. While the black newspapers heralded their improvements and continuing popularity, the reality was that they had peaked, and were teetering on the edge of decline. The resorts’ relentless upgrades signaled that the resorts were working harder than ever to bring in summer vacationers. The precipitous decline in patronage began in the late 1960s, and would all but end the existence of the resorts by the 1990s.

¹⁴ The resorts advertised sometimes varied slightly each week, so these numbers are rough estimates. The decline in resorts is clear when comparing advertisements from 1960 and 1970. See for example the vacation section of the *New York Amsterdam News* on July 16, 1960, compared to the vacation page a decade later, on July 18, 1970.

¹⁵ “Friendly Rivalry Benefits Vacationers,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 9, 1962.

¹⁶ “Peg Leg Plans Expansion In ’70,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 16, 1969.

¹⁷ Peg Leg Bates Country Club advertisement, *Afro-American*, June 13, 1970.

Peg Leg Bates's success in the 1970s was likely bolstered by the growing popularity of his resort among working-class vacationers, and the demise of other black resorts during the same time period. As early as the 1960s, black resort owners began to see a decline in patronage among their traditional middle-class clientele. They responded by diligently adapting their business models and advertising strategies to appeal to a broader range of guests. Resorts including Utopia Lodge, Peg Leg Bates Country Club, and Paradise Farm increasingly relied on group vacation packages and bus tours. Bus trips were enormously popular, and more affordable for guests who might not have had the means to visit the Catskills otherwise. Day-trippers usually paid a small fare, arrived early in the morning at a predetermined location in the city, and then set out by bus for the resorts.¹⁸ The guests used the resort facilities for the day, and then turned around and headed back to the city in the evening. An August 1972 bus trip to Utopia Lodge organized by Harlem businessman Matthew Arnold and the Arnold Auxiliary Hunting and Fishing Club was typical of these outings. Two hundred and fifty day-trippers, young and old alike, met at 8 a.m. at 116th Street and 7th Avenue in Harlem, where they piled into five buses for the three-hour trip upstate. When they arrived at Utopia Lodge, they enjoyed "a day-long series of parties, sports and dining on

¹⁸ Rates were approximately \$15 for adults, less for children. For examples of bus trip announcements to Peg Leg Bates Country Club see the Sanjac Social Club's "bus/outing picnic" advertisement in the *New York Amsterdam News*, June 5, 1976, and the trip advertised in the "Tomorrow's Generation" column in the *New York Amsterdam News*, July 23, 1977.

gourmet picnic foods.” By 8:30 p.m., the worn-out travelers were back in their buses and making the return trip to Harlem.¹⁹

Peg Leg Bates grew so reliant on bus traffic that in the early 1970s, he made the picnic area the focus of an advertisement in the *New York Amsterdam News*. The advertisement featured a headline, “PICNIC WHERE THE ACTION IS!”, followed by the amenities available to day-trippers at Bates’s resort: live music and dancing under a pavilion, barbeque pits, snack bars, outdoor sports and activities, changing rooms and showers, and fresh air.²⁰ The resort’s parking lot could hold up to 49 buses, and the picnic area accommodated 4,000 people.²¹ Melodye Bates-Holden recalled the immense number of buses that came to Peg Leg Bates Country Club every Saturday and Sunday:

... we really did have buses from one end of the road all the way to as far as you could see, lined up waiting to come in. And that would be about for a good hour and a half, and you’d end up with 40 buses and then they would all leave. And that was every Saturday and every Sunday. And that was when I was little, let’s say for all the 60s and half of the 70s ...²²

These weekend picnickers contributed significantly to the resort’s success in the 1970s, and helped keep it afloat. Black resorts had long catered social groups, but day trips by church groups, philanthropic organizations, social clubs, and others now represented a much larger share of the resorts’ business than in previous decades.

¹⁹ “Utopia Lodge Outing,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 2, 1972.

²⁰ Advertisement for picnicking at Peg Leg Bates Country Club in *New York Amsterdam News*, April 22, 1972.

²¹ “Whatever happened to . . . Peg Leg Bates?” *Ebony*, November 1973, 202.

²² Bates-Holden, interview.

Like Italian resorts, the African American resorts that stayed in business did so by adapting their businesses bit by bit every year. They offered new rate packages, hosted group events, brought in new entertainment, and sought new groups of potential vacationers. When vacationers began taking shorter trips to the Catskills, resort owners responded by creating different rate packages to accommodate them. Whereas vacationers had once stayed at the resorts for a week or two at a time, many now came for only a few days. At Peg Leg Bates Country Club, there was a weekend group rate (Friday to Sunday night), and a midweek group package (Monday through Thursday), as well as special day rates for day-trippers using the resort's picnic area on the weekends.²³ Paradise Farm offered special group rates for shorter stays.²⁴ In the mid-1970s, Peg Leg Bates experimented with staying open into the fall and winter for the hunting season.²⁵ Resorts owners also began offering their resorts as spaces for conferences and seminars. Peg Leg Bates Country Club opened the 1970 season by hosting a conference held by the Black Social Workers from Columbia University, providing space for over 100 guests to attend workshops.²⁶ King's Lodge also opened their resort to larger groups, advertising the resort's facilities "for seminars, etc. for up to 150 people."²⁷

²³ Bates-Holden, interview.

²⁴ Paradise Farm advertisements, *New York Amsterdam News*, July 9, 1977, and August 4, 1979.

²⁵ Peg Leg Bates Country Club advertisements, *New York Amsterdam News*, November 24, 1973; October 8, 1975.

²⁶ *New York Amsterdam News*, 2 May 1970.

²⁷ King's Lodge advertisement, *New York Amsterdam News*, July 8, 1978.

African American resorts in the Catskills began declining at the same time that civil rights efforts opened up new vacation possibilities for African Americans. By 1960, blacks were welcomed at most major hotels in the North, signaling the beginning of the end for resorts that had previously served a vital need in the black community.²⁸ Integration dramatically expanded their travel options, and they quickly began taking advantage of these new opportunities. In the Spring 1956 edition of *The Negro Travelers' Green Book*, a small segment entitled "Nationwide Hotel Association" signaled, to some extent, the potential dangers that integration held for black businesses. Members of the Nationwide Hotel Association realized that although African Americans welcomed integration, it threatened both the need for new black businesses and the existing, often profitable businesses that benefited from de facto segregation. They observed that in order to remain afloat, the black hotel industry had to adapt and modernize to meet black travelers' new demands. Dykes Brookins, national president of the Association, asserted, "I am convinced the Negro traveler would just as soon stop among his own if he could get—not comparable, but fair accommodations."²⁹ Black resort owners continually renovated and expanded their facilities in the 1960s and 1970s with this in mind. But Brookins' hopes would not be realized. Larger resorts, such as Peg Leg Bates Country Club, Paradise Farm, and King's Lodge were able to sustain themselves and remain popular into the 1980s and 1990s, but these family-owned and -operated

²⁸ Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), 258.

²⁹ "The Negro Travelers' Green Book" (New York: Victor H. Green & Co., 1956), 69.

businesses ultimately suffered (as did so many other black businesses) at the hands of larger, white-owned companies with greater capital and, therefore, greater luxuries to provide to their guests. Peg Leg Bates best summed up the challenge facing black entrepreneurs: “Integration? I love integration. But it hurt the black businessman.”³⁰

Some black vacationers continued to vacation in the Catskills, but went to white-owned resorts instead. Peg Leg Bates claimed to have lost fifty percent of his business after integration, because “blacks started going to these white resorts, the same blacks that used to come to me, when they come to this area [the Catskills], they’re staying at the white hotels but come over to me to say hello. And I started losing business like crazy.”³¹ Sometimes this was a matter of necessity. One announcement in the Baltimore *Afro-American* noted that Coppin State College, a historically black college in Baltimore, Maryland, was taking their “Winter Weekend Wonderland Class Trip” to the Concord Resort in Kiamesha Lake in January 1974. Because most African American resorts could not afford to stay open during the winter months, black business went to year-round, predominantly white-owned places instead. Bates noted that other times, African Americans went to white resorts because “white places had more facilities than I had or any other black resorts. They had indoor this, indoor that . . . the things that I had compared to them

³⁰ “A Legend and His Catskills Resort for Blacks,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1985.

³¹ Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates, interview, CD #6.

was second rate.” Nevertheless, he said, “I was able to last so long,” because “I had something that they didn’t have. I had personality and being with my people.”³²

Dykes Brookins also failed to take into account many wealthier African Americans’ desire to seek out more exotic travel destinations. By the 1960s and 1970s, enticing advertisements for travel to Jamaica, Bermuda, Barbados, Africa and other locales regularly jostled for readers’ attention alongside ads for Catskills resorts in the *New York Amsterdam News*.³³ The *New York Amsterdam News* touted the wealth of new vacation options available to black travelers: “Where do Blacks spend their summers? In 1977, the answer is anywhere and everywhere.” One option, the author noted, was to visit one of the many black resorts in the Catskills. She gave special shout-outs to “three of the most popular and established clubs”—Paradise Farm, Peg Leg Bates Country Club, and King’s Lodge. But the author, like many black vacationers, quickly moved on to bigger and better destinations: “Local vacations are fine for some, but many Blacks yearn for the glamor of a Caribbean cruise or the exotic [sic] of an African safari.”³⁴ Black resort owners in the Catskills undoubtedly cringed at the description. “Fine” was definitely *not* how they wanted to be portrayed in the black press, which had long been a crucial source of publicity

³² Clayton “Peg Leg” Bates, interview, CD #6.

³³ Advertisements for these and other faraway destinations began appearing in the black press in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but really took off in the 1960s and 1970s. Advertisement for Bermuda vacations in the *New York Amsterdam News*, August 7, 1965. For later examples, see the advertisement for the Forum Hotel Jamaica, *New York Amsterdam News*, August 3, 1974; and advertisement for Barbados, *New York Amsterdam News*, October 13, 1979.

³⁴ Travel to Africa was also driven by African Americans’ interest in traveling to their ancestral homelands, inspired in part by the 1977 TV miniseries *Roots*. “Where Are You Going For Vacation This Summer?” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 14, 1977.

for the resorts. The *New York Amsterdam News* and their affluent African American readership were moving on to bigger and better vacation destinations.

Black vacationers were easily persuaded to take their vacation dollars elsewhere. A stay at Paradise Farm seemed quaint and outdated when compared to an island getaway or an “East Africa Heritage Tour.”³⁵ James E. Churchman, Jr.’s story is characteristic of this change. After thirteen years of visiting Paradise Farm, the Churchman family stopped going in 1963 in favor of yearly trips to Bermuda. His enthusiastic memories of vacationing at Paradise Farm reveal not that he ever tired of going, but that integration opened up a wealth of new and exciting travel opportunities to his family. These changing vacation preferences were in keeping with earlier trends among the black middle class. As the resort area became financially accessible to more working-class African Americans, the resorts some of their social cachet. Whereas prosperous African Americans once asserted their class status by vacationing in the Catskills, they now did so by pursuing elite vacations outside the country.

Beginning in the mid-1970s, resort advertisements struck an increasingly distressed tone. A 1974 advertisement for Paradise Farm declared, “PARADISE FARM IS STILL BLACK, BEAUTIFUL, AND OPEN!!!” The advertisement drew on black nationalist language to proclaim that the resort’s longevity was a source of black pride, and worthy of continued patronage.³⁶ A little over a decade later, in 1985, an advertisement for Peg Leg Bates Country Club provided a not-so-subtle

³⁵ The advertisement for the East Africa Heritage Tour appears in the *New York Amsterdam News*, June 10, 1972;

³⁶ *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 May 1974.

reminder to potential guests: "Yes, I'm still alive and well!"³⁷ The black press also mustered the occasional reminder that the resorts were still in business. A 1986 *New York Amsterdam News* article suggested wistfully that "once a year folks who take overseas trips, etc. should help Black resorts like Pegleg Bates, Paradise Farm, etc. to stay in biz. We remember when those were the only resorts that welcomed them."³⁸ The article reflected not only the difficulties black resorts faced in staying afloat, but also African Americans' expanded travel opportunities. It conveyed a sense of responsibility for the resorts' continued livelihood, suggesting that the black community should return the favor to the resorts that so loyally served them when no one else would. But these efforts largely failed.

Paradise Farm and Peg Leg Bates Country Club would both be sold to Jamaican immigrants, and would take on a Caribbean flair. Jamaicans and other West Indian immigrants began emigrating to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century, but this immigration largely ceased during the Great Depression. West Indian immigration to the United States did not begin again in full force until the Hart-Cellar Immigration Act was passed in 1965, abolishing the national origins quota system established in the 1920s.³⁹ West Indian immigrants, the majority from Jamaica, came to New York City in large numbers after immigration restrictions were eased. West Indians began visiting African American resorts in noticeable

³⁷ Advertisement in "Traveling and Going Places," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 8, 1985.

³⁸ "Tattler," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 6, 1986.

³⁹ Milton Vickerman, "Jamaicans: Balancing Race and Ethnicity," in Nancy Foner, ed., *New Immigrants in New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 202-203.

numbers in the late 1970s. In July 1977, Peg Leg Bates hosted an outing of Brooklyn's West Indian Social Club. More than forty buses reportedly made the trip to the resort, and "it was a wk.end of peas & rice, congas and soccer balls . . ." ⁴⁰ Over time, the city's black community had a growing foreign-born population that was estimated to be 1 in 5 by the late 1980s. ⁴¹ A 1988 article in the *New York Times* described the process by which Caribbean immigrants settled and revitalized neighborhoods throughout New York City, especially Brooklyn, "with stubborn entrepreneurship." ⁴² In the Catskills, Jamaicans bought up resorts once owned by African American entrepreneurs and made them their own, appealing to a broad Caribbean audience. These shifts reflected a long history of resorts changing hands, catering to new, upwardly mobile immigrant groups from New York City.

In 1984, Sally Walker sold Paradise Farm to Jamaican immigrants Ransford and Hilda Newman. The reported purchase price, \$250,000, was a far cry from the \$400,000 it was said to be worth three decades earlier. ⁴³ The Newmans kept the Paradise Farm name, but gave it a new slogan: "The Caribbean in the Catskills." They printed new travel brochures emphasizing the "authentic Caribbean atmosphere in the heart of the Catskill Mountains," and proclaimed, "When you can't make it to the islands, Paradise Farm is the place to be." ⁴⁴

⁴⁰ "Billy Rowe's Notebook," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 30, 1977.

⁴¹ Statistics from "Caribbean Verve Brightens New York," *New York Times*, June 3, 1988.

⁴² "Caribbean Verve Brightens New York," *New York Times*, June 3, 1988.

⁴³ Advertisement in "Discover Vacation-Land," *New York Amsterdam News*, June 9, 1984.

⁴⁴ Paradise Farm travel brochure, "The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills" exhibit documents, DCHA.

Peg Leg Bates held out only slightly longer than Sally Walker before selling his resort. Melodye Bates-Holden began to see a noticeable decline in business at the Peg Leg Bates Country Club in the mid-1970s:

And then it started to be less. And then a couple times we didn't have anybody for the weekend . . . in the 80s, somewhere around there. '84, '85. I know my mother [Alice Bates] passed away in 1987. She died July 7, 1987 and the Independence Day weekend we didn't have anybody, and my father told me, 'don't—when you go see your mother in the hospital don't tell her we don't have anybody.'⁴⁵

In 1989, Bates decided to lease his resort property to Jamaican immigrants Doreen and Lloyd Simmons, with the opportunity to purchase. By the early 1990s, the Simmons' fully took over the resort's ownership and management. Like the Newmans, they now encouraged vacationers to "Come experience the authentic taste of the Caribbean in the heart of the Beautiful Catskill Mountains."⁴⁶ By using ethnic clues and direct appeals to immigrant vacationers nostalgic for their home countries in their advertising materials, both the Simmonses and Newmans employed a tried and true marketing strategy with a long history in the Catskills.

The shift from African American to Caribbean ownership and patronage did not come without its share of challenges. In 1991, ethnographers working on an exhibit about ethnic resorts in the Catskills for the Delaware County Historical Association interviewed Doreen and Lloyd Simmons. In their interview field notes, the ethnographers observed that the changing clientele caused noticeable conflict at Peg Leg Bates Country Club: "there is a racial conflict between African-Americans

⁴⁵ Bates Holden, interview.

⁴⁶ Peg Leg Bates Country Club flyer, "Bring Two Friends? Yes!!!", "The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills" exhibit documents, DCHA.

(who were Peg Leg's Patrons) and West Indians. African Americans apparently look down on the newer immigrants, who are reaping the benefits of the expansion of black power, but who never were around to participate in the fight for those things."⁴⁷ Indeed, Jamaicans struggled to assert their ethnic identity in a country where the dominant white society focused instead on solely on their black racial identity. These efforts could and did provoke conflict with African Americans.⁴⁸

Peg Leg Bates always maintained that his Country Club was open to both black and white customers. As his business began declining in the 1980s, he recognized that an integrated clientele was necessary to the survival of his business. In an article in the *New York Times* in 1985, he expressed regret that, contrary to his intentions, he was never able to integrate the resort. He lamented, "Whites come to the Peg Leg Bates Country Club to see my nightclub show. They'll drink at my bar. But not one white will stay in my rooms."⁴⁹ Bates considered this aspect of the resort's operation a failure, and believed that his inability to integrate the resort caused its eventual demise.⁵⁰ African American resorts were constructed in response to white discrimination, and suffered economically when integration was

⁴⁷ Janis Benincasa and Mary Zwolinski field notes, Peg Leg Bates Resort, Kerhonkson, New York, September 7-8, 1991. From "The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills" exhibit, Folklore Archive, DCHA.

⁴⁸ "Jamaicans: Balancing Race and Ethnicity," 212-213.

⁴⁹ "A Legend and His Catskills Resort," B1.

⁵⁰ *The Dancing Man, Peg Leg Bates*, prod. Richard Smigielski, dir. Dave Davidson, 58 min., Hudson West Productions and South Carolina Educational Television, distributed by PBS video, 1992, videocassette.

enforced. Historian Robert R. Wyeneth aptly calls this “one of the great ironies of the civil rights movement.”⁵¹

Yet considered alongside the broader decline of Catskills resorts in the late twentieth century, the picture becomes more complex. Integration was one of many forces that contributed to the decline of African American resorts. Melodye Bates-Holden disagreed with her father’s assessment:

... people have a lot of things in their homes, they have the swimming pool, they have games, they have the video and internet and they have, they can afford—things don’t cost that much, and it’s relative as far as price because gas is ridiculous [laughs]. ... my father would tell you segregation changed a lot of stuff too, so that was a big thing, but to me it winds down to the fact that anyone can go anywhere.⁵²

The reality lies somewhere in between. As long as Peg Leg Bates could not attract white business, he could not adapt to the resort area’s declining popularity like his Italian, German, and Irish counterparts. Resorts like Acra Manor similarly struggled to compete with national hotel chains, but they could count on other white vacationers trickling in to supplement their traditionally Italian clientele. Black resort owners could not do the same, and the consequences were devastating. Today, not a single black resort remains in the Catskills.

Puerto Rican Resorts

Puerto Rican resorts remained popular well into the 1970s and 1980s. Like African American resorts, they relied heavily on working-class vacationers. There had always been a significant working-class clientele at Puerto Rican resorts,

⁵¹ “The Architecture of Racial Segregation,” 39.

⁵² Bates-Holden, interview.

and this remained true in the final decades of the twentieth century. The resort owners had long recognized the limited means of many of their visitors; for a small price, bus trips continued to provide an escape, however brief, for poor and working-class vacationers from the city. As bus traffic continued to increase, the number of families visiting the resorts declined, and the resorts increasingly catered to singles and couples.

As more visitors came for day trips rather than overnight visits, Las Villas diversified. Not all of the villas were typical “resorts” with accommodations for overnight guests, organized activities, and other typical resort amenities.⁵³ A *New York Times* article from 1971 noted, “the present-day villas run the gamut from the jerry-built tar-papered dance halls that spring up every summer like toadstools to, at the other extreme, Villa Nueva, the largest and most luxurious of the older Spanish villas . . .”⁵⁴ Many of these places were more like bars and nightclubs, offering only food, drinks, and dancing. Visitors moved from villa to villa in search of the best food, drinks, and entertainment. The same *New York Times* article quoted “A lanky car salesman from the Bronx” as saying, “We dance, we eat, we drink, then we move on to another villa and start all over again.”⁵⁵

⁵³ In a nonfiction essay about Las Villas, author Tom Wolfe described the outward appearance of the resorts: “The *villas*—literally, country estates—look at first glance like road houses. Most of them have a simple one-story construction, with a lot of cinderblock and plate-glass and electric signs, but six of them have motel or hotel accommodations . . .” Tom Wolfe, “Ramito! Jibaro Hero,” in Gerard Walker, ed., *Best Magazine Articles 1966* (New York: Crown, 1966), 156.

⁵⁴ “Villa Hopping in the ‘Puerto Rican Alps.’”

⁵⁵ “Villa Hopping in the ‘Puerto Rican Alps.’”

The recreational landscape changed in other ways, too. Puerto Ricans bought tiny plots of land in Plattekill and built equally tiny summer cabins for their families. Few had the resources to build expensive summer homes. According interviewee Wilfrido Castillo, Jr., Puerto Ricans “would come up, buy a one hundred by twenty-five [foot] lot, and in one weekend build a cabin, and that was it! [They would] build an outhouse . . . Primitive. Early primitive.”⁵⁶ Castillo’s description is strikingly reminiscent of the casitas—balloon-frame shacks and bungalows (“casita” literally means “little house”)—that Puerto Ricans began building in New York City in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In his study of New York City’s casitas, Luis Aponte-Parés describes how Puerto Ricans built these structures in areas with empty lots and abandoned buildings. The urban landscape spoke to the tremendous displacement experienced by Puerto Rican New Yorkers in the second half of the twentieth-century.⁵⁷ Aponte-Parés argues that Puerto Ricans succeeded in “appropriating the environment and conferring meaning on it by building alternative landscapes throughout the devastated urban milieu.”⁵⁸ Puerto Ricans transplanted this architecture to the countryside, too. The availability of tiny plots of land allowed them to stake a claim for themselves, however small, in Plattekill. Collectively, they contributed to the creation of a vast Puerto Rican recreational

⁵⁶ Castillo, interview by author.

⁵⁷ Luis Aponte-Parés, “Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios: Preserving Contemporary Urban Landscapes,” in *Preserving Cultural Landscapes in America*, ed. Arnold R. Alanen and Robert Z. Melnick (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 95.

⁵⁸ “Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios,” 95.

landscape that itself was a form of resistance to the upheavals in their New York City neighborhoods.

The 1965 Hart-Cellar Act and subsequent influx of new immigrants prompted a change in the ethnic composition of the resorts' guests. Beginning largely in the 1970s and exploding in the 1980s and 1990s, a large influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America immigrated to New York City. By 1990, the Latino population represented one quarter of New York City's population.⁵⁹ Puerto Rican resort and tavern owners and employees interviewed in the early 1990s observed the effects of this new migration, noting that their guests still included Puerto Ricans, but also Dominicans, Colombians, Ecuadorians, Hondurans, and Cubans.⁶⁰ Gladys Figueroa, owner of the Villa Campoalegre, told an interviewer that the majority of her patrons were Dominican and Puerto Rican, but that "all kinds of people come here, all nationalities but those who come by bus are mostly poor people who cannot afford expensive entertainment."⁶¹ During the same time period, Puerto Rican demographics were changing too. After peaking in 1970, their numbers declined consistently relative to other Latino groups in New York City, a consequence of increased return migration

⁵⁹ Dominicans were the largest group among these Latino immigrants. *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, 143-144.

⁶⁰ Wayne Gorbea, interview by the Delaware County Historical Association, September 16, 1991. From "The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills" exhibit, DCHA.

⁶¹ Figueroa, interview.

and their relocation to areas outside of New York City and elsewhere in the United States.⁶²

With more buses, more day-trippers, and more drinking came even heavier policing at Las Villas. Eventually, the heavy-handed tactics of Plattekill's constables took their toll. Former constable Ed Wager put it bluntly: "after awhile the police got the upper hand."⁶³ Many Puerto Rican resort owners and employees agreed that policing contributed to the resorts' decline. Pedro Guardarramas spoke vaguely on the topic, but it is clear that they influenced the viability of the resort and tavern business: "... there are strict controls around here and that has affected business," he said. Victor Serrano, who worked first as the maître d' at Sunny Acres and later as a bartender and waiter at the Villa Guardarramas, was more blunt. He told an interviewer that police harassment of people drinking contributed to the resorts' decline.⁶⁴ Some people specifically blamed the raising of the drinking age and drunk driving arrests. Gladys Figueroa observed, "people come here to dance and drink and if they get a ticket on the way back, the next time they'll stay in the city where they don't have to drive."⁶⁵ Guardarramas concurred: resorts lost "clients and money" when the drinking age was raised to 21 in 1984.⁶⁶ Their hunches appear to

⁶² *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, 144.

⁶³ "My Life History."

⁶⁴ Pedro Guardarramas, phone interview with Juana Camacho, September 30, 1991, and interview notes from Victor Serrano interview with Mary Zwolinski, September 15, 1990. From "The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills" exhibit, DCHA.

⁶⁵ Gladys Figueroa, interview by the Delaware County Historical Association, September 27, 1991. From "The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills" exhibit, DCHA.

⁶⁶ Guardarramas, interview.

be correct. The New York State Police's 1965 investigation report noted that town officials, believing that "the situation gets aggressively worse each year . . . are actively attempting to improve the situation, chiefly through working through the State Liquor Authority."⁶⁷ This was a particular issue for business at the Puerto Rican villas. Many of their guests came for the day to drink, dance, and party, and then returned to the city. With stricter laws and stricter enforcement, many visitors did not want to chance the long, impaired drive home to the city after a night of heavy drinking.

In the early 1990s, the only resorts remaining were Villa Guardarramas, Sunny Acres, and Villa Casablanca, and all were struggling to stay in business. The Villa Campoalegre and Villa Mina de Oro converted their businesses to restaurants and bars with space for dancing, and no longer offered overnight accommodations. The Villa Nueva, once considered the most high-class resort in Plattekill, came under Chinese ownership in the late 1980s, and was reopened as the Garden Cathay resort (as of 2014, it is known as "Turtle Creek Golf Course at Garden Cathay"). Even as Las Villas began to falter and their popularity declined, however, the Puerto Rican population in Plattekill continued to grow. As had happened in towns and villages throughout the Catskills, many vacationers who enjoyed visiting Plattekill decided to make the town their home. City residents were drawn to the small town life, the relative safety and security, and the pre-existing Latino community. A 1987 article in the *Times Herald-Record* newspaper, "Hispanics find Plattekill Haven," registered

⁶⁷ Investigation report into the riot potential of Plattekill's Puerto Rican summer resort section, Non-Criminal Investigation Case Files.

a perceptible shift in the Town's demographics. According to the article, the 1980 census estimated that the Hispanic population at 1,285, with 963 Puerto Ricans. Seven years later, local residents put the estimate much higher—between 3,000 and 6,000. Whatever the exact growth, by the late 1980s the town had a large and growing Latino population.⁶⁸

The same article quoted a number of Latinos who had left New York City for Plattekill. Fred Diaz, previously a grocery store owner in the Bronx, purchased a general store in Plattekill. The newspaper noted that, "Not long after he moved, his old store in the Bronx was held up twice." "I'm not making that much," he said, "but I'm not afraid to walk out of here and fear I'm going to be hit from behind." Another resident emphasized that, unlike in the city, no one in Plattekill would push drugs on their children. A former president of the Puerto Rican Civic Association, Anibal Irizarry, told the reporter, "The reason they come is they know they're not going to find crime."⁶⁹ Of course, fear of crime was just one of many factors that influenced their decision to move to the town. Many Puerto Ricans settled in Plattekill because they visited first as vacationers and liked the rural landscape, the wide-open spaces, the pre-existing Spanish-speaking community, and the affordability. The safety of the community was one of many factors that influenced their decision to leave the city.

By settling in Plattekill in large numbers Puerto Ricans helped shape the small town's politics, which had long been reliably conservative. Puerto Ricans

⁶⁸ "Hispanics Find Plattekill Haven," *Sunday Record*, February 1, 1987.

⁶⁹ "Hispanics Find Plattekill Haven."

largely voted Democratic, and local Democratic and Republican politicians took note. Democrats, at a numerical disadvantage on the Town Board, became aware of the potential for the new population to influence the town's politics. Democratic councilwoman Judith Mayle told a reporter, "I don't think without their support you get close to being elected."⁷⁰ The politics of leisure could have a dramatic impact on resort towns, long after the resorts themselves had closed for good.

Conclusion

The relative absence of crime in the Catskills remained a significant selling point for vacationers from New York City well into the 1980s and 1990s. In the early 1990s, Guy Chirico, the Italian owner of Scribner Hollow Motor Lodge (a non-ethnic motel), observed: "I don't think it's as bad as they say it is, but certainly the PR is terrible. And crime or muggings is virtually unknown up here."⁷¹ Italians were not the only vacationers concerned about urban crime, and enthusiastic about the refuge that resorts provided from those fears. African Americans from New York City also valued the resorts as an escape from crime in the city. In a 1985 article Peg Leg Bates told a *New York Times* reporter "While you're here are the Peg Leg Bates Country Club, you are secure, you are protected." He went on, "You will not be robbed; you will not be mugged." Twenty-six year old vacationer Ashley Drayton confirmed this sentiment. He rented a bike during his visit at the resort, something that he wouldn't have been able to do in his Brooklyn neighborhood: "You can't

⁷⁰ "Hispanics Find Plattekill Haven."

⁷¹ Guy Chirico, undated interview, interviewer unknown. From "The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills" exhibit, DCHA.

leave a bike around in East Flatbush. . . . Even if you're on it, they take it."⁷² But fear of crime alone could not sustain the Catskills resort area.

Ultimately, a number of shared factors contributed to the decline of the Catskills as a resort vacation destination. In the final decades of the twentieth century, resort owners were competing not only for visitors' loyalties, but also with their increased incomes and ability to travel farther from home. Guests demanded more and more modern amenities from resorts, and many began to seem quaint at best, and outdated at worst. Affordable airfare made it easier for vacationers to travel long distances. Suburbanization, backyard pools, and air conditioning further impacted the resorts' popularity. Historian Jeff Wiltse argues that the dramatic growth of backyard pools in postwar suburban America was a consequence of "middle-class Americans' desire to recreate within more socially selective communities." Ironically, this impulse was part of what had once drawn vacationers to Catskills resorts. Once people could have private swimming pools in their backyards, this part of their appeal lost some of its luster.⁷³ Air conditioning made the heat more tolerable in the city, and the escape to the country less urgent. And importantly, the mass exodus of white New Yorkers from New York City in the second half of the twentieth century also resulted in the abandonment of their long-cherished recreational spaces—urban *and* rural.⁷⁴

⁷² "A Legend and His Catskills Resort for Blacks," *New York Times*, July 15, 1985.

⁷³ Jeff Wiltse, *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 182-183.

⁷⁴ *Boardwalk of Dreams*, 105-112.

Some people blamed younger generations for losing interest in the resorts, both as resort owners and resort patrons. Peg Leg Bates spoke wistfully of his daughter's unwillingness to take over the family business:

[Melodye] fell in love while she was in college and got married . . . and she saw how hard I wanted them to take over if anything ever happened to my wife, or if anything happened to me. *But*, in later years, they decided they didn't want no parts of it, and the reason for that decision was they wanted a nine to five job. Well in the resort business like this, and any resort owner will tell you this: there's no such thing as a nine to five, it's . . . you're working eighteen to twenty hours a day. And Melodye and Preston, that's her husband's name, saw how hard we were working and they didn't want to work that hard.⁷⁵

Many resort owners and guests of African American, Italian, and Puerto Rican resorts observed that not only did younger generations have little interest in ethnic resort vacations, but they also had no desire to vacation in the Catskills.

Everyone seems to have an opinion on what caused the demise of resort vacations in the Catskills, and the explanations vary a bit from group to group. No one factor is to blame.⁷⁶ Collectively, these changes devastated the Catskills resort economy. The decline of the Catskill Mountains as a resort destination fits within a broader decline of family vacationing in the United States for the very same

⁷⁵ Clayton "Peg Leg" Bates interview, CD #6.

⁷⁶ Sociologist Phil Brown, who has written extensively about Jewish resorts in the Catskills, has made a similar argument about Jewish resorts. A whole host of factors contributed to their decline. In addition to many of the reasons mentioned here, he also cites intermarriage ("It was hard to be in the very Jewish Catskill environment with a gentile spouse"), people moving out of the city or state, less work in seasonal industries like the garment industry, and changing family structures—as more women began working, they could no longer go up to the Catskills for large portions of the summer with their children while their husbands visited on the weekends. *Catskill Culture*, 232-237.

reasons.⁷⁷ One aspect of the decline can be stated with certainty, however. White ethnic resorts such as Acra Manor and Villa Roma managed to survive by appealing to a broader audience beyond their traditional ethnic clientele.⁷⁸ They succeeded in attracting a wider range of guests by expanding the range of services and amenities offered, from conference rooms for large work functions, to wedding facilities and catering. Resorts catering to racial minorities did not have this luxury. Integration could not easily erase stubborn racial divisions, making the decline of the Catskills particularly devastating for black and Puerto Rican resort owners.

⁷⁷ *Are We There Yet?*, 179.

⁷⁸ The Bavarian Manor, a German resort in Purling, is another example.

CONCLUSION

“OUR CATSKILLS”: RESORTING TO MEMORY

The Catskills in Cyberspace

By the turn of the twenty-first century, Catskills resorts were no longer the social and cultural centers of group life that they once were for New York City’s racial and ethnic minorities. Most resorts had been sold off, abandoned, or adapted to new uses. With no one willing or able to invest in actually preserving and restoring the remaining resorts, collective memory of those once-vibrant cultural spaces has increasingly moved into cyberspace. In recent years, a growing number of Internet sites have been created to collect resort history and reminiscence, supplanting physical communities with virtual ones. These websites serve as anchors of collective memory for increasingly dispersed ethnic communities—the vast majority of which no longer vacation in the Catskill Mountains.

Facebook groups have become particularly important centers of remembrance, and there are active Facebook groups devoted to Italian, African American, and Puerto Rican resorts. Facebook groups for Italian resorts like Pleasant Acres, Pine Springs Resort, and the Jolly House are most common, but there is a page for an African American resort, King’s Lodge, and a page devoted collectively to Las Villas.¹ There are also Facebook groups for other ethnic groups

¹ Pleasant Acres Resort Facebook page, accessed April 17, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/52751418458/>; Garzilli’s Pine Springs Resort Facebook page, accessed April 17, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/136136718501/>; Jolly House Facebook page,

that vacationed in the Catskills. In 2014, for example, the “Did you spend your summer vacationers in (Irish) East Durham?” group had over one thousand members. For Jewish resorts, there is also a “Borscht Belt and Catskill Hotels” group and a “Grossinger’s 1919-1986 page.”²

These sites provide an important counter to dominant public memories of the Catskills that still focus on Hudson River School artists like Thomas Cole and Asher Durand, nineteenth century tourism, and the iconic Jewish resorts made familiar to millions of Americans through popular films like *Dirty Dancing*. Facebook groups enable the preservation of a mostly unknown or forgotten world of vacation landscapes in the Catskills. By so doing, their efforts should not be dismissed as meaningless exercises in backward-looking sentimentality or nostalgia. They represent, at least in part, an ongoing struggle of people to make sense of their place in a complex, multicultural nation.

Most of these Facebook groups are run and dominated by people who vacationed or worked at the resorts in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. People less than thirty years old and older people who recall the heyday years after World War II contribute much less frequently to these sites. Most of the former vacationers are

accessed April 25, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/jollyhouse/>; King’s Lodge Facebook page, accessed April 17, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/65804131277/>; and Las Villas of Plattekill, New York Facebook page, accessed April 17, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/PlattekillVillas>.

² Did you spend your summer vacationers in (Irish) East Durham? Facebook page, accessed April 17, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/IrishCatskills/>; Borscht Belt and Catskills Hotels Facebook page, accessed April 17, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/BorschtBelt/>; Grossinger’s 1919-1986 Facebook page, accessed April 17, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Grossingers-1919-1986/119063911498376>.

people who visited the same resort year after year, and who have fond memories of the resorts. The resorts with the greatest longevity tended to foster and sustain close, long-term relationships between vacationers. Even after the resorts closed, many people still stayed in contact, and continued to reminisce about the resorts long after they were gone. The large, extended families that once vacationed at the resorts are also reflected in the membership of these Facebook groups. Many of the people in the Pleasant Acres Facebook group, for example, have one or more relatives who are also members.³

The Internet provides the space and flexibility for individuals to reconstruct these lost communities, rekindle old friendships, and share memories of their favorite resorts. It is particularly valuable to communities that have experienced dislocation and dispersal and have few tangible remains in the landscape to preserve. Because most online participants did not own resorts, they have few artifacts to give their memories a tangible focus. Facebook groups provide a virtual “place” in which to anchor social memory and share memories, photos, videos, and images of resort postcards and brochures. One enthusiastic member of the Pleasant Acres Resort Facebook group shared links to audio recordings of resort nightclub shows in 1973.⁴ In the Garzilli’s Pine Springs Resort Facebook group, members

³ Malcolm R. Parks argues, “geographically proximal offline communities are frequently the foundation for ‘virtual’ online communities.” Malcolm R. Parks, “Social Network Sites as Virtual Communities,” in Zizi Papacharissi, ed., *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 120.

⁴ Sam Lombardi nightclub show, August 26, 1973 at Pleasant Acres Resort, accessed April 17, 2014, Part 1, <https://soundcloud.com/radiojoe-1/sam-lombardi-part-one#play> and Part 2: <https://soundcloud.com/radiojoe-1/sam-lombardi-part-two#play>. Vince Garri, opening to the Vince Garri Show, ca. July – August 1973 at

have digitized and uploaded home videos from the 1960s and 1970s that show guests eating, socializing, swimming, and participating in masquerade shows.⁵ On the “Las Villas of Plattekill, New York” Facebook page, the administrator uploads photos and asks group members to help identify the resorts and musicians pictured.⁶ Although these Facebook groups all grew organically, the sentiments members expressed are remarkably consistent from page to page, across racial, ethnic, and class lines.

Vacationers at Italian and Puerto Rican resorts are particularly effusive. Many seem to have crystal-clear memories of the resorts. Their descriptions engage all five senses; they describe the resort landscape down to the minutest details, from the sounds of resort owners announcing lunch over the loudspeakers to the smell of the resorts. On the Pleasant Acres Facebook page, Augusta Marrapodi (who was also an interviewee for this study) recalled, “I still remember the smell of the lobby when you first checked in.” She continued with a description of her yearly routine upon arriving at the resort: “I’d always get a postcard. I’m sure I still have them somewhere. Then you would get that green key and race to the room, expecting a change, but never getting it...Always that simple room. Boy did I love that

Pleasant Acres Resort, accessed April 17, 2014, <https://soundcloud.com/radiojoe-1/vince-garri-show-summer-1973#play>.

⁵ For examples of these home videos, see: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=10100527838838807&set=o.136136718501&type=3&theater>; and <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=2171168366867&set=o.136136718501&type=3&theater>, both accessed April 17, 2014.

⁶ See, for example the April 2, 2014 post asking for help identifying the villa where Puerto Rican guitarist Yomo Toro is playing: <https://www.facebook.com/PlattekillVillas>, accessed April 25, 2014.

place.”⁷ On the Las Villas Facebook page, vacationers share memories of musicians who played at the resorts. The daughter of Sunny Acres owner Ismael “Shorty” Martinez, recalled meeting Puerto Rican musician Juanito Sanabria as a child: “I remembered he came to visit us for a few days at Sunny Acres. We practiced a song together, he played the guitar and I played my flute. Then we ‘performed’ this song under the big tree. Even one of the musicians accompanied us with bongos. So memorable ;-).”⁸

Many people continued to make pilgrimages to the resorts. Like the African American travelers who showed up at my childhood home, the former Smith Haven, in the 1980s, they are lured by their tremendous nostalgia for the resorts and their desire to see what has become of them. They snap photos of the current, often shabby, remains of the former resorts and post the pictures to the Facebook groups for other members to see. A member of the Pine Springs Resort Facebook page created a photo album entitled “Quick Drive-By Aug. 4, 2012 – Very Sad.” Most photos show run-down buildings and poorly maintained landscapes, captured primarily to document the painful decline. A photo of a “NO TRESPASSING” sign prompted a fellow group member to comment: “I hate this. It really hurts my heart. :o(.”⁹ Many group members expressed dismay at the dilapidated properties, and

⁷ See comments on the Villa Maria Hotel Facebook group page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/144191856553/> and the Pleasant Acres Resort Facebook group page, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/52751418458/>, both accessed December 19, 2013.

⁸ Post about Juanito Sanabria, March 12, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/PlattekillVillas>, accessed April 25, 2014.

⁹ Album, “Quick Drive-By August 4, 2012 – Very Sad,” on the Garzilli’s Pine Springs Resort Facebook page, accessed May 15, 2013, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=oa.10151312065023502&type=1>.

spoke longingly of buying the resorts and restoring them to their former glory. Although many members of these Facebook groups wax nostalgic, all know that the preservation and restoration of these resorts to their former glory would be impossible. The resorts now have symbolic importance to the community, and the photos, videos, and memories provide a reminder of the ethnic communities that once existed in the Catskills. It also reminds them of what they lost with the decline of Catskills resorts, a process that many vacationers undoubtedly contributed to by choosing to vacation elsewhere. Their nostalgia is striking reminiscent of Italian Americans who mourned the loss of early twentieth century Italian enclaves, while also contributing to their decline by moving to New York City's suburbs.¹⁰

The memory work of these individuals serves as a reminder that people use history in the formation of identity; the past is useful to them as it relates to their present-day needs.¹¹ Memories of Catskills resorts are intensely personal, and reflect historian Roy Rosenzweig's concern that many Americans' interest in the past does not reach far beyond their immediate social and familial worlds.¹² Facebook groups reinforce the silo-ing of memory of Catskills resorts by ethnic group. Because "villa hopping" (moving from resort to resort) was so common among Puerto Rican vacationers, online conversations move between focusing on individual resorts in Plattekill, and reminiscing about the town's Puerto Rican and Spanish resorts collectively. Italian Americans, in particular, were so loyal to their respective resorts that their online conversations rarely mention other resorts,

¹⁰ "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People," 317.

¹¹ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 186-187.

¹² *Presence of the Past*, 186

regardless of ethnic group. For them, it is as if each resort was the *only* resort. On the Facebook page for Pine Springs Resort, a group member posted, “Who remembers the name of the German Resort down the road?” Another member responded, “That’s what we called it—Smullenger’s. I guess the official name was unimportant for us.”¹³ This is not surprising, of course. The memory of these resorts is divided along ethnic and racial lines, just as the resorts themselves once were. Vacationers were aware of other groups vacationing around them; however, most did not interact with those other groups. They also did not necessarily connect the dots and recognize that they were all part of a larger historical narrative, in which many different ethnic and racial minorities vacationed in the Catskill Mountains each summer.

“Rebranding” the Mountains

Public memory, like the personal reminiscences of former vacationers, resort owners, and employees, similarly obscures a more inclusive narrative of vacationing in the Catskills. In July 2012 the *Times Herald-Record* newspaper, which serves a large portion of the Catskills and Hudson Valley, published an editorial by columnist Barry Lewis. The editorial, “Rebranding Catskills is a bid to deny our history,” came in response to a contest sponsored by the Catskill Park Resource Foundation to “rebrand” the mountains with a new slogan.¹⁴ The broader goal was to remedy the

¹³ Question posted by user Tommy Jordon on the Garzilli’s Pine Springs Resort Facebook group on April 11, 2013, accessed April 17, 2014, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/136136718501/>.

¹⁴ According to the Catskill Park Resource Foundation’s mission statement, the organization’s primary goal is “to create, promote, and expand awareness of the

public's opinion of the Catskills vacationland. The Foundation claimed the public perception of the Catskills is "unappealing at best, negative at worst," and explicitly linked this stale image to the history of the Borscht Belt: "A persistent identification of the region with the no-longer extant and formally decrepit Borscht Belt is pervasive."¹⁵ The effort, and the not-so-subtle dig at the Borscht Belt, infuriated Lewis:

I don't know anyone who's ever been confused by the term 'Borscht Belt.' . . . And anyone who knows our Catskills would never mistake it for the Rip Van Winkle Catskills. Or the Greene County Catskills. Or Delaware County Catskills. Or the Woodstock-Hunter Mountain Catskills. No. Our Catskills were the Borscht Belt Catskills. The Mountains. . . . But like the majestic Concord hotel that once towered over that lake [Kiamesha Lake] and the hundreds of resorts that filled our Catskills, the Borscht Belt is gone. There's no denying that. But that doesn't mean we should deny its existence. . . . [The Foundation] want[s] to raise \$5 million and rebrand the Catskills and bury any memory folks might have of our Borscht Belt.¹⁶

I am on board with Lewis's critique in many ways. The resort area's twenty-first century economic woes run much deeper than the passing of the Borscht Belt's glory days and the resort ruins left in its wake. The broader history of family vacations suggests that the decline of the Catskills resort area was not unique; the postwar boom in the popularity of resorts and their painful, late twentieth century bust was replicated in resort areas throughout the United States.¹⁷ The many factors outlined in the previous chapter indicate that the problem goes much deeper

many assets of this region and, thus, to attract sufficient tourism to revive and sustain its economy." "Catskill Park Resource Foundation Mission Statement," Catskill Park Resource Foundation, accessed October 21, 2013, <http://cprandco.org/more.html>.

¹⁵ "Catskill Park Resource Foundation Mission Statement."

¹⁶ Barry Lewis, "Rebranding Catskills is a bid to deny our history," *Times Herald-Record*, July 29, 2012.

¹⁷ *Are We There Yet?*, 179-181.

than the decline of one ethnic groups' vacationland. Suburbs, air conditioning, and backyard pools all reduced the market for leafy, open-air retreats. Cheaper airfare allowed many families to vacation in more distant locales. Younger generations were less inclined to value family vacations with attractions that catered largely to their elders when so many Disney World-like attractions beckoned. A new slogan for the Catskills—the Catskill Park Resource Foundation's uninspired choices included "The Catskills: Time for an Altitude Adjustment," "The Catskills: So Near, Yet So Far Out," and "Find Yourself in the Catskills"—would not save the area's economy, which has been distressed for decades.¹⁸ And there is indeed a rich history of twentieth century tourism that should not be forgotten.

But both the Catskill Park Resource Foundation and Barry Lewis were operating on the assumption that the history of the Borscht Belt was, essentially, *the* history of the Catskills vacationland. It was either the history to celebrate, or the history to discard and leave firmly in the past. Both unintentionally contributed to a much longer process of rebranding the mountains, one that has been underway since the resorts began to decline in the 1970s. The Foundation wrongly pinned some of the blame for the region's economic stagnation on the remains of the recreational landscape created by Jews from New York City, or at least on the fact that this is what they think present day New Yorkers blame.

In contrast, Lewis rightly identifies the fact that different regions in the Catskills have long embraced their own distinct identities within the broader Catskills recreational landscape. That region *was* in fact best known for its many

¹⁸ Peter Applebome, "It May Be an Area Words Cannot Describe," *New York Times*, July 30, 2012.

Jewish resorts. But by equating “our Catskills” with the Borscht Belt, and assuming that his readers feel the same, he leaves out many other groups of vacationers and resort owners who participated in the resort economy, some located quite near the well-known Jewish resorts. For example: The Granit, a Jewish resort in Kerhonkson, was located near two African American resorts, Peg Leg Bates Country Club and Rainbow Acres. Kerhonkson was also home to Soyuzivka, a popular Ukrainian resort.¹⁹ The Tamarack Lodge was one of many Jewish resorts in Greenfield Park, but Utopia Lodge, an African American resort, was also in the town. For African Americans, Italian Americans, and Puerto Ricans (along with the many other ethnic groups that vacationed in the mountains), “our Catskills” has very different, distinct connotations that are equally worth remembering. By continuing to associate the resort landscape with one group, we leave out a long, rich, and much more complex history of the Catskills resort area. It also deprives us of the ability to connect these distinct histories of ethnic and racial minorities vacationing in the Catskills, and understand the broader significance of the twentieth century resort landscape.

How and when did “the Borscht Belt” become synonymous with “The Catskills,” despite the obvious racial and ethnic diversity of its resort landscape? Part of the answer lies in the sheer scale of the Jewish resorts, both in number and size. There were many more Jewish resorts than African American, Puerto Rican, and Italian resorts, and this was particularly true of the region Barry Lewis focused

¹⁹ At the time of publication in 2014, Soyuzivka was still a popular summer destination for Ukrainians. See Soyuzivka resort website, accessed April 17, 2014, <http://www.soyuzivka.com/Welcome.html>.

on.²⁰ The Catskills Institute at Brown University has kept a growing list of Catskills hotels, resorts, and bungalows on its website. In 2014, this list included more than 1,100 hotels, the vast majority of which were Jewish-owned and catered to a Jewish clientele.²¹ To put this in perspective, there were roughly one hundred Italian, thirty African American, and twenty-five Spanish and Puerto Rican resorts and boarding houses. The largest Jewish resorts could accommodate more guests, too. Grossinger's could hold 1,200 guests, the Concord 1,700, and many other Jewish resorts could take in more than 500 guests at a time. None of the other ethnic groups vacationing in the Catskills had any resorts on this scale.²² The largest Italian and African American resorts, such as the Villaggio Italia, Pleasant Acres, and Peg Leg Bates Country Club, could only accommodate 200 to 300 people overnight.²³ The Catskills truly were a rite of passage for New York City's Jewish population. Despite the immense popularity of Italian, African American, and Puerto Rican resorts, they simply did not attract as many vacationers as the Jewish resorts. This undoubtedly has contributed to the central place of Jewish resorts in memories about the Catskills.

²⁰ The same goes for German, Irish, Ukrainian, and other ethnic groups that vacationed in the Catskills.

²¹ "Hotels and Bungalows," The Catskills Institute, accessed March 26, 2014, <http://catskills.brown.edu/hotelsbungalows.shtml>.

²² *Growing Up At Grossinger's*, 178.

²³ These numbers are hard to pin down, likely because it was in the interest of resort owners to inflate their capacity and popularity a bit, and the number of rooms often increased over time (and in some cases, decreased again as the resorts declined in later decades). In 1969, Peg Leg Bates said he had accommodations for 160 people ("Peg Leg Plans Expansion in '70," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 16, 1969). A Pleasant Acres brochure from the 1990s advertised that it had 150 rooms, and a newspaper article claimed that the Villa Nueva once had 200 rooms; these two documents are in "The Best of Both Worlds: Ethnic Resorts in the Catskills" exhibit documents, DCHA.

Historian Hasia R. Diner's book, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America*, provides an additional framework for understanding why Jewish resorts loom so large in American popular memory. Diner argues that New York City's Lower East Side neighborhood took on "mythic dimensions" in Jewish memory in the decades following World War II, bolstered by the work of novelists, filmmakers, artists, and academics who collectively helped establish the Lower East Side "as synonymous with *the* American Jewish experience," and "a symbol of Jewish life before the need to compromise, or the desire to fit in."²⁴ This analysis can be extended to the role of the "Borscht Belt" in modern Jewish memory, as a site where Jewish vacationers could both retain strong ties to their Jewish identity *and* actively participate in American consumer culture and assimilate into American society.²⁵ The Jewish resorts were, in the words of sociologist Phil Brown, "a central vehicle for Jews of Eastern European descent to become Americanized while keeping Jewish."²⁶ Like the history of the Lower East Side, the history of Jewish resorts in the Catskills has been documented in memoirs, fiction, film, and television, and preserved in institutional archives. The resulting popular memory of the Catskills, perfectly encapsulated in Barry Lewis's editorial, is not the result of any ill intentions. Rather it reflects the culmination of these years of active memory work focused on preserving the history and memory of Jewish resorts and bungalow colonies. As we have seen, members of each ethnic group that vacationed in the

²⁴ Hasia R. Diner, *Lower East Side Memories: A Jewish Place in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8, 31, and 177.

²⁵ David Stradling argues that the Catskills "would come to represent the long Americanization process, the place where Jews participated in rituals of the broader culture, in leisure and consumption." *Making Mountains*, 179.

²⁶ *Catskill Culture*, 266.

Catskills were no doubt aware of the many different people who vacationed in the mountains, but their resorts were what they knew best, and cared about and talked about most.

The history of Jewish resorts in the Catskills has also been presented as a story about the upward mobility of New York City's Jewish community. It is largely portrayed as a success story and a story of assimilation. Histories of Jewish resorts reflect a larger tendency of immigration historians to focus solely on European Americans and their efforts to assimilate and "become American," and ignore narratives that would challenge this process—namely those that deal with race and empire.²⁷ While the history of Italian resorts might be presented in a similar manner, as a story of upward mobility, assimilation, and the achievement of the "American dream," the history of African American and Puerto Rican resorts presents a more challenging and uncomfortable narrative. Unlike their white ethnic counterparts, racial minorities found that racism and discrimination continued to hamper their efforts at upward mobility, well after legal barriers to their success had been dismantled.

The great objective of this dissertation is to challenge the dominant narrative about the history of Catskills resorts in the twentieth century by including voices previously overlooked. It wasn't easy. Although the Catskills landscape is dotted with remnants of resorts that catered to many different racial and ethnic minorities, their memory seems to have been largely forgotten by long-term residents or

²⁷ Donna R. Gabaccia, "Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (December 1999), 1128-1129.

unknown completely to newer residents and younger generations. The history of Jewish resorts in the Catskills is so firmly rooted in local memory that it took great persistence to press beyond those narratives to recover a virtually forgotten past. Even former owners and patrons of Italian, African American, and Puerto Rican resorts had internalized this Catskills narrative. When I went to interview them about *their* experience, many of them steered me toward the Jewish resorts. One former Italian resort owner even tried to send me home with a copy of Tania Grossinger's book, *Growing Up At Grossinger's*!

When the history is expanded to incorporate the voices of other racial and ethnic minorities, our understanding of the Catskills resort landscape becomes much more nuanced and complex. We see that resorts were not solely a stepping-stone for ethnic minorities on the way to assimilation and acceptance in American society. They were also a reflection of persistent discrimination against racial minorities through much of the twentieth century. They built upon and continued to naturalize patterns of segregation and inequality that structured vacationers' everyday lives in New York City. In the postwar decades, Italians actively asserted identities as whites and reconfigured the meanings of their ethnic identity to gain acceptance as white Americans. Resorts provided a space for vacationers to reshape their ethnic identity in private while publicly assimilating into American society. The political and economic stakes were much higher for African Americans and Puerto Ricans. Throughout most of the twentieth century, their resorts were both sites of protection from, and resistance to, racism and discrimination. The omission of these histories in public memory is part of the deliberate forgetting of

discriminatory racial practices in the North by the white majority, as segregated sites disappear from the landscape or their history is “whitewashed.”

Acknowledging the histories of African American, Puerto Rican, and Italian resorts in the Catskills, and the remaining cultural landscape, forces us to remember and come to terms with their reasons for existence.

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